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MEET MR. STEGG

Kennett Harris

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BY

KENNETT HARRIS

NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
1920

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MR. STEGG

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THESE STORIES ARE DEDICATED TO
THAT VERY RARE CREATURE, A
WELL-LOVED AND HIGHLY
RESPECTED CRITIC—
MY WIFE

H342Im

MEET MR. STEGG

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Keith Cochran

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INTRODUCTION

Kennett Harris entered into the spirit of the American west of the 1880s and seemed to cherish memories of these earlier days even though he was born in England and never lost his English mannerisms and customs.

Born in 1864, Kennett Frederick Harris came to the United States as a young man and was in Hot Springs, Dakota Territory by 1885. In a census of that year for the household of John Dennis, Kennett Harris is listed as twenty one and his brother William A. Harris is listed as nineteen and both are listed as "laborers."

Arriving in Hot Springs, Kennett took a pre-emption up Hot Brook, the Hot Brook springs being on his land. He built a log cabin about a mile above Evans Plunge which is on the north side of Hot Springs, and lived there for a while. His brother Will Harris, and his father, who came a year or so later, built a cabin near his and they lived there during their stay in Fall River County, Dakota Territory.

In 1886, Kennett Harris was elected to the office of Register of Deeds. In 1929, on the death of Kennett Harris, W.L. Wyatt recalled that "long after the primaries, Mr. Harris said he believed he would run for Register of Deeds. When reminded that he had no nomination, he said he didn't need any, and taking his saddle horse, he proceeded to canvass the voters of the county independently, and was elected by a good majority."

Kennett Harris filed on a homestead in Shep's Canyon, living there long enough to prove up on it and working on the neighboring ranches during that period.

Kennett Harris and Anna Brown Martin were united in marriage in Hot Springs on September 27, 1887; Anna being the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William M. Martin. The couple lived in a small house on the east end of Park Avenue and three children were born to this union, Kennett Jr., Theodore and Dorothy. A number of years after Harris left Hot Springs, he and Anna were separated and later Kennett remarried.

Early in 1890, Kennett Harris and his brother-in-law, Chet Martin, founded THE HATCHET, a contemporary newspaper to the HOT SPRINGS STAR. Kennett edited this newspaper for several years and also published a monthly magazine called THE HESPERIAN, this lasted for about two years. These two endeavors are the first indications of a literary interest of Mr. Harris.

About 1895, Mr. Harris and his family moved to Chicago where he became associated with the CHICAGO RECORD. In 1898, as a war correspondent for the RECORD, he went with the First Volunteer Cavalry, better known as the Rough Riders, to the Spanish American War and remained with them through all their engagements. After his return from the war, Harris visited his old friends in Hot Springs, South Dakota and spent some time there. After this he made his home in Pasadena, California, living there for many years.

In mid December 1929, Kennett Harris went to Miami, Florida to recouperate from an illness; he died there on December 18.

While residing in Hot Springs, Mr. Harris acquired the background for most of his later writings and the first known story as published by a popular magazine was published in the June 15, 1912 issue of COLLIER'S magazine and was titled MRS. DURKEE DRAWS THE LINE.

In 1920, MEET MR. STEGG was published by Henry Holt and Company of New York. This is a collection of eight fictional stories and is the only anthology of his stories published in a hard cover book. Original copies of this book are rare and almost never offered on a used book list or handled by antiquarian book sellers; which shows that this book was published in one printing of a very small edition.

Harris used the "Bar-T" ranch and other ranches and the "Box Elder stage station" as the background for his stories in this anthology. Box Elder, South Dakota is just east of Rapid City. As Harris mentioned Rapid Valley, also east of Rapid City, in GETTING EVEN, shows that he meant this Box Elder as the scene for these stories as he was acquainted with this

area. Well known ranches, mainly from Fall River County, South Dakota, are used such as T A N, Z Bell, Flying V and a fictional town called Blueblanket. Most communities in and around the Black Hills (which are too numerous to mention) are used and other landmarks such as rivers and canyons. As many of his characters are drawn from local Black Hills residents of about 1885 to 1920, the correct identification of these people is not now known.

In THE BRACHYCEPHALIC BOHUNKUS, Harris states "Enrico was at Rapid (City) by that time, doing a land-office business and sending drafts to pa regular. Joe Simms, the HATCHET man, looking over his exchanges, seen that his piece about the Bitter Water Back Number was copied all over the territory, and even the Sioux City and Omaha papers had it in." In this statement, Harris is referring to his adventures in the newspaper line with his paper called THE HATCHET and he calls himself Joe Simms. Also in THE BRACHYCEPHALIC BOHUNKUS "That was in the Custer CHRONICLE (still published), where Joe Simms, the HATCHET man, seen it." Here the story is alluding to the Custer County "Cardiff Giant."

In THE BIRD IN THE HAND, Harris writes "I (Mr. Stegg) was like Sim Broderick got to be. Remember Simmy? Used to be county clerk and register of deeds of Minnekahta in the eighties." Here Harris is referring to his term as Register of Deeds in Fall River County. Harris refers to Minnekahta County, but Minnekahta (no longer in existence) was a town twelve miles west of Hot Springs in Fall River County. This time he refers to himself as Sim Broderick instead of Joe Simms.

In reading these stories it will become apparent that Kennett Harris was a master storyteller. It is not known if these eight stories were previously published in a magazine such as COLLIER'S or SATURDAY EVENING POST; possibly not.

The following stories were published in the SATURDAY EVENING POST and all are fictional stories by Kennett Harris

and all have a Black Hills setting:

October 13, 1923 THE CLASS OF ONE
May 17, 1924 NOISY BOY
March 7, 1925 NEXT TO GODLINESS
November 28, 1925 THE PITCHER AND THE WELL
January 30, 1926 THE RULES OF THE GAME
April 10, 1926 THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE
May 8, 1926 LADY CLARA VERE DE VERE
January 8, 1927 SOMETHING JUST AS GOOD
February 12, 1927 GETTING THE HABIT
March 26, 1927 HINDSIGHT
May 7, 1927 OTHER PEOPLE'S TROUBLES
July 30, 1927 TRUE AS THE STARS ABOVE
November 12, 1927 THE BLOWHARD
February 18, 1928 THE LUCK OF LOSS
April 7, 1928 SOMETHING THE
TRUE-LOVE TRAIL
April 21, 1928 WHEN IT COMES TO WOMEN
June 2, 1928 THE USES OF VIOLENCE
December 8, 1928 RED SKIES AT NIGHT
January 5, 1929 IN THE SWEAT OF HIS BROW
February 16, 1929 EILEEN AROON
May 4, 1929 OFTEN WOMAN VARIES
January 25, 1930 NO TIME FOR GIRLS
February 8, 1930 FORTUNATUS PREFERRED
March 22, 1930 THE SACRED TRUTH

It is hoped that these stories plus the one from COLLIERS can be published in a later anthology. This master storyteller, with his vast amount of local color, should not be lost to posterity.

Keith Cochran
October 17, 1991

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INTRODUCTORY

Ladies and gentlemen, meet Mr. Stegg.

To do this, many of you will have to travel into a far country; all the way up between 43° 20′ and 44° 45′ north latitude into the Territory of Dakota, and to get into the Territory you will, all of you, have to go back into the past a little. But the Black Hills country is well worth while visiting and living in. I who tell you this am not to be suspected of ulterior motives, having, at the present time, no real estate interests there — only friends, and Mr. Stegg is one of them. I hope that you will think Mr. Stegg worth while when you have made his acquaintance.

Sam Stegg, the old bullwhacker turned granger.

Here, perhaps, it may be well to explain that a bullwhacker and a cowpuncher are two different things. A bullwhacker is a gentleman who hauls freight on wagons drawn by oxen from remote centers of commerce, such as was Sidney, Nebraska, to outposts of civilization like, say Custer, Rapid City and Deadwood, as they were in an earlier day; so, you see, he is professionally more akin to the muleskinner. To be a good bullwhacker, one must be an excellent pedestrian, a fluent and vociferous speaker of the language customarily addressed to oxen, tough as a hickory knot, inured to hardship and extremes of weather, resourceful in emergency, an expert in the manifold uses of baling wire, possessed of a digestive apparatus not inferior to the

ordinary feed-grinder and less susceptible to the action of corrosive liquids, patient as Job, yet a man of action and indomitable courage.

Mr. Stegg has all these qualifications, as he has demonstrated during many years back and forth on the old Sidney trail, and he has other qualities. That he is the soul of hospitality is not so very remarkable in a country where hospitality is the invariable rule, but when to the abundant and not badly cooked ranch fare that he sets before his guests he adds the diversion of his inexhaustible yarns, he achieves a distinction in entertainment. It is not to be supposed that he originated the sadly portentous phrase "that reminds me," but there is no doubt that his reminder is set on a hair trigger. A breath will set it off, but once started, its mechanism has to run down of itself. Men who live much in the great solitudes often seem to lose the faculty of speech in a great measure and become taciturn and laconic when the opportunity of social intercourse presents itself; but not so Mr. Stegg. He is always glad of a chance to talk and makes the most of it. He is a complete chronicle of the Hills bound in brown leather; he knows everybody; he was on familiar terms with such sinister celebrities as Wild Bill, Fly-specked Billy and Lame Johnny and was among those present at their something-of-the-suddenest departure from this life. On the other hand, he is on equally familiar terms with judges, senators, bankers and others of the respectable and mighty or mighty respectable, who know better than to put on any airs with him, even if they had the inclination. He knew most of them when.

The stock tender at the Box Elder stage station is favored with more of Mr. Stegg's society than any one else. The

two are congenial and, moreover, near neighbors, as proximity is reckoned in the Hills. But whether at the Station or at the store in Blueblanket, all but necessary business is suspended when the old man arrives and the crowd gather around him, confident that they will hear something worth repeating. Sometimes he is asked for documents substantiating what he relates, but even that little pleasantry is not often indulged in.

Mr. Stegg is a listener, as well as a talker; eager and greedy for gossip, he has heard much and forgotten nothing. Regarding certain things, he can be as close-mouthed as a sprung trap, and this known fact, as well as his sympathetic and genial nature, has made him the recipient of many confidences, especially from the young of both sexes, concerning whom his interest is unflagging and his curiosity insatiable. He religiously attends all the dances within a radius of sixty miles, and the withered, bald-headed, gray-bearded old reprobate can dance as well as any of the boys and better than most of them, not confining himself to squares, by any means. And, believe it or not, the girls like to dance with him. He has an ingratiating twinkle in his sharp old eye, a fatherly and benign manner and he knows how to say the things that girls like to hear even from old men. A ladies' man, if you please! You may remember that I put the ladies first in my introduction.

It is rather strange, considering all this, that there is not, and, as far as is known, never has been a Mrs. Stegg. I like to fancy that in his youth there was some romance with an unhappy ending, that, nevertheless, left no trace of bitterness in his good heart. At all events I have concluded that of the many roads that he has traveled, actually or

vicariously, the one of which he has the most vivid memories and whose scenes and incidents dwell most pleasantly in his mind is that universal path that never did, and never will run smooth.

MEET MR. STEGG

I

THE BRACHYCEPHALIC BOHUNKUS

IF the Bar-T boy expected to create a sensation with the grinning skull that he had brought into the Box Elder stage station he must have been grievously disappointed by the indifferent attitude of the stock tender and the bullwhacker, who scarcely deigned a glance at the poor moldy emblem of mortality, or, for that matter, at the Bar-T boy himself. They were withered, gray-and-tan Hills veterans, these two, whose experiences had left them little to wonder at and nothing whatever to exclaim about, and they prided themselves on their imperturbability. Moreover, the Bar-T boy was all too casual in his display of the skull. If he did not anticipate excitement the old-timers were mistaken.

"Have you et, Buddy?" inquired the stock tender, mindful of the duty of hospitality at least, though it was long past the noon hour and the dishes were washed. "Better unsaddle and turn the little horse into the corral for a bite, hadn't you?"

"Once I get the saddle on that wall-eyed old son-of-a-gun he stays cinched until I'm through with him for the day," said the Bar-T boy with a glance at his mount, which had sidled with dragging bridle to the shade of the lone cottonwood. "He ain't hay-hungry; all he wants is his half

pound of flesh out of whatever part of a person is nearest to him. He ain't no vegetarian, that flea-bit old bag of slats and brimstone. No, I don't aim to linger here; and I met up with the Welsh Harp chuck wagon the other side of Baldwin's, thank you most to pieces. I just allowed you might be interested in this here pick-up of mine."

The stock tender brought his abstracted gaze from the distant line of Cheyenne bluffs and let it rest for a moment on the skull. Then he nodded perfunctorily.

"How many men riding for the Welsh Harp this trip?" as asked.

"Wes Powell hasn't got back from Ogallala yet, has he?" the old bullwhacker supplemented.

The Bar-T boy made no reply. He was regarding the skull in the palm of his hand with the air of Hamlet in the graveyard scene. "To think that this here was once a man like we-all!" he moralized. "A man who drunk and swore and chewed tobacco and lied and stole, and maybe raised whiskers like you fellers! And now — look at it!"

"It ain't no object to take pride in," said the old bullwhacker with a bored air. "You could go to some of these yer cemeteries back East and load a wagon with such for the digging, if the sexton was agreeable and your taste run thataway; but most human white folks leaves 'em underground. I've collected scalps in my time, but I've always drawed the line at that kind of bric-a-brac." He eyed the skull with furtive curiosity nevertheless. "Where did you catch it, Bud?"

"Over by Medicine Butte. I was riding a piece off the trail to look at some brands on a bunch of steers ——"

"When the little horse kicked against it as it was stick-

ing up out of the ground, and you got off, out of curiosity to see what it was, and uncovered this mysterious relict of a former age," the old bullwhacker concluded.

"You've got it down fine — all but," said the Bar-T boy. "The little horse is a fair long-range kicker, but he ain't got no elastic leg, and this here was twenty rods away from him. I just seen something white ——"

"Sure!" the old bullwhacker again interrupted with a beaming face. "That's it! 'Seen something white!' Lordy! how that brings back old times. Buddy, that's how the man that pays you more wages than you're worth got his start — Enrico Billings. You don't know him personally, because he's living in Omaha now, sitting with his feet up on a diamond-studded mahogany desk, clipping coupons with a pair of eighteen-carat gold shears. Owns eighty per cent of the Bar-T stock; and that's just a little side issue. When your boss goes in to see him he crawls into the office on his hands and knees, with the annual report in his mouth. But fifteen years ago Enrico seen something white a piece off of the trail and got off his cayuse to see what it was. You remember Enrico, at Hermosilla, Hank?"

The stock tender nodded.

Said the Bar-T boy: "If it ain't putting too great a strain on your imagination I'd like to hear the facts about Enrico. I've ambitions towards coupon-clipping myself, and it might head me, tail up, for that there diamond-studded desk."

"It ain't noways unlikely or improbable," said the old bullwhacker gravely. "Enrico was just about such a bow-legged, freckle-faced, slack-jawed young sooner as — happens round here every once in a while. He didn't have no

respect for age; and sex didn't have no particular terrors for him either. If he ever blushed his boots hid it; if he ever done a full day's work it was because he felt like it; and if he ever had a dollar, forty-eight hours after he was paid off, it was because he was snow-bound or had a heap better luck than usual. No, Buddy, you ain't got no worse handicaps than what Enrico had — not to signify. Only folks sort of took to Enrico.

"Sedalia Warren, she took to him more than most, although she never let on that she did until it come to a showdown. Sedalia was one of these girls who'll give a man seventeen thousand guesses and then raise the limit and leave him studying for quite a spell. A girl has to be a little pink-petaled daisy to do that and not fall all over herself, and Sedalia never stubbed her toe one time, and she had a guessing contest on that would have made a cabinet-organ firm's mouth water for the size of it. Enrico wasn't one of the contestants. He knew. He always knew everything, and was willing to bet saddle, spurs and gun on it.

"I give in," he says to her three minutes and eight seconds after she had told him she was pleased to meet him. 'I give in,' he says. 'I've held out against the pick of the prettiest from the Panhandle to Pennington County, but you've got me for keeps.

"'You certainly was born lucky, and I want to be the first to congratulate you.'

"'Well, if that's so I'm tickled to death,' says Sedalia, smiling at him with deceitful duplicities. 'I haven't been so happy since I had the facial neuralgia,' she says. 'The only thing that I'm worrying about is where I'll find any kind of a market for you.'

"'I said you had me for keeps,' says Enrico. 'That means to have and to hold, all and mighty singular, with appurtenances and privileges nevertheless and notwithstanding, until Death horns in betwixt us and edges one of us out of the bunch. Me, I'm going to mail an order to Chicago for a wedding garment bright and early to-morrow morning.'

"'Don't forget to mention that you want a straitwaistcoat,' says Sedalia.

"Right there the fiddler hollered 'Cheat or swing!' and Sedalia cheated. She done it the lightest, neatest, gracefulest and easiest you ever seen. It was like trying to pick a bubble of quicksilver off a china plate, seemed to me, for Enrico to more than touch her with the tips of his fingers — and yet the next time he got her. And he swang her! He certainly did! That dance was in Clint Soper's cabin — a tight fit for two set — and I thought Enrico would knock the chinking out of the wall with the tip of that girl's shoe. After that quadrille Dick Wade, the coroner, led Enrico outside and intimated that it pained him to see a lady manhandled thataway.

"'Did you ever take a bite out of the back of your neck, Dick?' asks Enrico. 'You might try it; you'll find it easier than sitting on yourself, which you might have occasion to do if you monkey with me.'

"'This here is a social occasion and no time nor place for me to perform the duties of my office or provide the material for the same,' says Dick. 'But you mark my prophetic words: I'll collect my fees for sitting on your remains afore I've done with you.'

"And them was sure enough prophetic words, although

it didn't turn out just the way Dick meant 'em. Anyway, there wasn't no bloodshed that night and Enrico went back and made himself unpopular with the boys and an object of pity and contempt to most of the girls by buzzing Sedalia whenever he got a chance, and taking the medicine she gave him as if he liked it.

"Bright and early after a dinner that he didn't eat next day Enrico ambled over to Old Man Warren's ranch just north of the Bosbyshell addition to the city of Hermosilla, and he lingered there for about four calendar months, spellbound and spellbinding. Once in a while he'd tear himself away long enough to catch up a little on his sleep or get a meal of victuals or go through the motions of punching cows for Al Williams so's to get a little spending money, but them was only what you might call intervals. If you took Old Man Warren's word for it they was. The old man was from Missouri — that's how come he named Sedalia — and he was homesick. He figured on making a living raising garden truck on his ranch, which there was about ten acres plow land on the creek and the rest of the hundred-and-sixty banks and gullies of gypsum that he had taken up because there wasn't no better and because he liked elbowroom. Well, he made out to live, but he didn't like the country, and he seemed to have much the same opinion of Enrico. He didn't act as you might say hostile, at first, but Enrico just naturally palled on him. He used to look at the boy and sigh. 'Same old face!' he'd say. 'Same old face!'

"'The same sweet, sunny, honest, good-looking face!' Enrico would say, to help him out. 'Always welcome, ain't it?'

"'Always open, night and day!' the old man would come

back, and shake his head mournfully. But he kept the peace. Sedalia wasn't by no means so tender of Enrico's feelings, but the boy told her that he liked it.

"'It's refreshing and it has all the charm of novelty,' he says to her. 'You take a fellow that's been sought after and made over, the way I've been all my life — nothing too good for him and no word but words of praise and love — and he gets cloyed up a considerable. What you tell me about myself is like a sprinkle of pepper sauce on a oyster — gives a fellow an interest. But it won't last. You'll get to appreciating me more and more. Pretty soon I'll begin to dawn on you, sort of.'

"'You've begun that quite a while,' says Sedalia. 'I'd like to have you sunset on me, sort of.'

"About that time she was particular encouraging to Dick Wade — also to Ed Prince and Walt Barlow and Pat Ferguson and Shorty Simms, and a dozen or so others whose names I disremember. They was the guessers. But Enrico was right easy in his mind all along, dog-gone him! He could keep up his end with any of 'em in personal conversation, and while he wasn't no confirmed scrapper he'd come out of one or two little tangles in good shape and left the other tangler a considerable marred and chipped on the edges. He was one of these cheerful and willing cusses with a straight and steady look and as prompt and perniciously active as a nigger-chaser on the Fourth, once his powder catched fire; but all the same he had a long fuse and kept it damp at the starting end. Another thing, nobody but Dick Wade suspected that he had any show whatever with Sedalia. I reckon Dick was the only one that hated him with any real enthusiasm.

"Time went on, as the fellow says, and finally, along about fall, it come to a show-down betwixt Sedalia and Enrico. That was the year that the F. E. & M. V. graders got into Hermosilla. All of the prominent citizens was broke then. They'd already cut loose from the mother county and organized a infant of their own, electing themselves to all the offices by unanimous majorities, but the tax collections was small, slow and scattering, and when they come to cut 'em up there wasn't no chunk big enough to cover grocery bills. When the railroad come, though, they fixed for a boom. Billy Thomas fixed his pins to go to Yankton to get a touch of high life in the legislature and haze capital down Hermosilla way on the side; all the other boys got out and looked after their fences in the political field. Offices was agoing to be something more than empty honor and a little grubstake now and then. Dick Wade, who had taken the coroner office out of party spirit and a hope of something better, come out for sheriff.

"Everybody was happy and hopeful except Old Man Warren. He'd already sold out his truck to the grading camps and hadn't soaked the prices to 'em near what he might have done, and that weighed on his mind. He hadn't got no illusions about selling his ranch for town lots, and it looked like a hard winter. On top of that, Enrico was round more than ever — and that's how it come to a show-down.

"Enrico rode over one afternoon and found Sedalia out by the chicken pen with a hammer and a bucket of staples trying to fix a gap in the netting, and the first thing he noticed was that her eyelids was a mite red and her nose a trifle swelled. She didn't seem pleased to see him either.

"Honey," he says, "you shouldn't take on thataway when I'm gone. You might know that I'd be back again some time. Cheer up! I'm here now, anyway. Don't you see I'm here?'

"'You bet I do!' she says. 'But if you think you are a cheering sight to me you'd better go away and think it all over again. Find a nice quiet place about two thousand miles off and take a year or two to ponder.'

"'If you wan't crying for me, what else could it be?' asks Enrico. 'You've got almost everything else you want or need, except a few things I'm going to get you.'

"'If you must know, I pounded my thumb,' says Sedalia.

"'Show me!' says he.

"But she put her hands behind her back. 'Honest, no fooling; you'd better go, Enrico,' she says; 'and if I was you I'd stay gone.'

"'Where's pa, that he lets his darling little girl pound her poor thumb with the nasty old hammer?' says Enrico.

"'Pa's in the house, with his buffalo gun took apart, cleaning and oiling it up for you,' says Sedalia. 'Pa's painted his face and socked the hatchet into the war post up to the eye,' she says. 'He's bad medicine for you, my poor Enrico — and he's working fast. You climb your horse again and jog along. Honest! I've done my best with him.'

"Enrico noticed that her lip was a-trembling. 'Let me see that thumb!' he says. He caught it with one of them quick motions of his, looked at it and kissed it; then he looked at the other one and kissed that, although there wasn't mark nor scar on either of them. Still holding them little thumbs he looked at her long and steady.

"'We'll quit fooling now,' he says. 'Leastways we'll quit this particular kind and fool along, pleasant and easy together, for the rest of our days. I told you right at the jump-off that we was going to get married, you and me. You thought I didn't mean what I said. Look at me now and you'll know I do. I know you think a heap of me and, get down to cases, you're too much of a dear, God's woman to play with me when the play's run out.'

"She was enough of a God's woman to hold off as long as she could, although her blushes and her shining eyes gave her away.

"'Heavens, the conceit of him!' she says. 'You're homely as a mud fence; you don't know any more than the territorial statutes provides; and you're poor as skim toast-water, which is worse than all; and you have the nerve ——'

"Enrico certainly had the nerve. Right there he drew her to him by the thumbs, catched a new holt and stopped her mouth in the old-fashioned way until she was breathless. Then he went to the house to see pa; and Sedalia went along, too, hanging tight to his arm.

"Sure enough, pa was cleaning up the old gun, and he had blood in his eye when he looked up and seen who it was. For about as long as you could draw a long breath he had two notions, but that was long enough for him to think, and he threw one of 'em into the discard and went on oiling and didn't do no more than grunt when Enrico asked after his health.

"'You won't get no buffalo this side of the Canadian line,' says Enrico, watching him with friendly interest. 'If I was you I'd go to manicuring the shotgun and try up the creek for mud hens.'

"'A shotgun wouldn't make no impression on the game I'm after,' says the old man. 'I doubt if this here ain't too light to make much of a dent in your hide. What I need is one of them mountain howitzers they've got up at Fort Meade; but I'll give this a trial if I get a line on you anywheres within a mile of this house. You've got about seven minutes and ten seconds to make that mile, Enrico.'

"'Now, pa, I told you that was foolish talk,' says Sedalia. 'And there's two of us against you now,' she says.

"'I reckon if that's so I'll cut down the majority and make it an even break,' says the old man. He gave the lock a finishing wipe with the rag, slipped a ca'tridge into the chamber and swung round on Enrico. 'You get out of here, lively!' he says. 'I'm a long-suffering man, but there's metes and bounds to endurance, and you've been crowding me to the edge for some time. Sedalia, you step to one side. You ain't no sandbag, nor yet no armor plate; and that young fellow has got six minutes good yet if he don't make no false moves.'

"'Step aside, honey,' says Enrico. 'I'm agoing to sit down, and pa is too much of a sport to shoot me sitting. Now, pa, just state your objections to me as a son-in-law like a gentleman and a Missourian and quit acting long-haired and frantic. What's the matter with me? Never mind the little things, but specificate the big trouble.'

"'You're all right in a good many ways,' says the old man — 'Sedalia, you just let my whiskers be! — I don't call to mind what them good points of yours are exactly, Enrico, but for the sake of argument we'll say that you've got 'em. The big trouble with you is that you ain't worth hell room; and I've set my heart on a son-in-law that will

give Sedalia all the luxuries of sustaining grub and shoes and a new dress pattern now and then, to which she has been accustomed. I want a son-in-law that will be a prop and staff to my declining years, and not no free boarder on the sweat of my brow, and I'll sure stain my soul — Sedalia, if you don't let them whiskers be I'll paddle you good! — I'll sure slop lifeblood afore I'll be crossed by any lop-eared, loafing, leather-breeched cowpunch that ever swung a rope instead of swinging in it.'

"'I guess I catch the general drift of your remarks,' says Enrico. 'You want Sedalia to marry a boy that's got all kinds of them good points that I've got and is a money-maker. All he's got to do is to prove up on them qualifications and get his patent; ain't that so? Well, why didn't you ever mention it? Now listen: I'll take you up on that! I can get money just as easy as I can get anything else I want if I give my mind to it; and I'll wait for Sedalia until you're satisfied. Is it a whack?'

"Well, there was a heap more talk before it was, but finally the old man come to his milk. But there wasn't to be no bar, meantime, on any of the other boys. Pa Warren figured to himself that Dick Wade, for one, was agoing to be the next sheriff and that with the railroad coming in there was apt to be what they call a strong bull movement in crime. Pa always liked to copper his bets.

"Before Enrico went away Sedalia says to him: 'You come out of that mighty well, dear; but if I wasn't right ambitious and if you had amounted to a row of pins you'd never have come even this near to getting me.'

"'No "this near" about it,' says Enrico. 'I've done got you! But why so?'

"'I'm a great hand to make something real nice out of mighty poor material,' she says. 'I take a pride in it, and I'm going to be entitled to a heap of credit by the time I've got you cut and shaped. Any idea how you're going to make that stake, darling?'

"'About a million of 'em,' says Enrico. 'All that's going to bother me is to pick out the best one. I might go down to Edmund Bell's Eagle-Bird and get quick action on a small investment in red, white and blue. I'd win, I know. I've got the largest size lucky hunch I ever had in all my born days; still, I don't want us to get our start thataway. Holding up the stage is another idea, but there's an element of risk in it that as an engaged man I don't feel free to chance. There's prospecting. I might strike a bonanza anywhere, once out of the gypsum belt, but——' He shook his head at the red earth banks with their milky outcroppings. 'If there was only a market for gypsum now!'

"'How about taking up a good homestead somewhere and working hard and steady and saving your money to put into cows?' Sedalia suggests.

"'Hm-m!' says Enrico. 'Only trouble with that is that you and me will be old, old folks before the merry wedding bells ring out if we stick to the bargain with pa.' He catched a sight of her face. 'But I'll do that if I can't think of nothing better,' he says in a hurry. 'Why, sure! Working hard and steady is my long suit. But — I'll study on it, sweetheart. That hunch of mine is getting stronger every minute. Sure, I'd make a good granger; but there ain't no denying that I've got brains, and it would be a pity not to use 'em.'

"'I'll do some studying myself,' says Sedalia. 'Don't you bank too much on that intellect of yours though. The pen's full of men that done brain work instead of using their backs the way they ought.'

"She said that kind of discouraging and Enrico went back to Fred Willor's boarding house feeling a mite less chipper. Supper wasn't quite ready, so he went into the little back setting room and sat down by Fred's specimen cabinet. Fred come in after a while and found him staring into the glass doors. 'I'll get the key,' Fred says.

"'Don't trouble!' says Enrico. 'I ain't no rock sharp; and I wasn't looking at anything in particular, anyway.'

"'No trouble,' says old Fred, unlocking the door and commencing to unload the débris. 'Here's a little bottle of nuggets I washed out of my claim on Castle Creek. First and last, I took close on to fifteen hundred dollars out of that claim, and if I had had any sense —— That's pyrites there, and alongside of it is a chunk of the pure quill from the Holy Terror. I'd like a ton of it. Them there is geodes, and that's a stalactite from Wind Cave. These here is gypsum crystals and ——'

"'Let me look at that!' says Enrico. 'It don't look like gypsum to me.'

"'It's the crystals,' says Fred. 'You find that blamed stuff in all kinds of shapes. They make plaster Paris of it — same as that statuette up on the whatnot there. Say, there was a popeyed fool got off the stage here one day from Sioux City and he tried to tell me that statuette was mercury. Stuck to it — until I told him I'd done too much amalgamating with mercury for him to run that kind of a blazer on me. What do you reckon he's got them wings

on his heels for? And on his hat, b'gosh! He's what you might call a light dresser, ain't he? Like Lo, the poor Injun, whose untutored mind clothes him before and leaves him bare behind, sort of.'

"'He's sure a well-made figure of a man,' says Enrico. sizing up the statuette, kind of interested.

"Fred turned back to the cabinet. 'Here's a chunk of petrified wood,' he says. 'I reckon you've see a plenty of that, but this here come from Montana. There's whole forests of it there — and other things — bones and shells and turtles. Beats all how it come! I'd hate to sleep out on some of them hillsides, for fear I'd wake up and find myself building material. By gosh! there's the bell at last. You'd better hurry if you want anything to eat.'

"He locked up the cabinet and they went in to supper. Enrico was kind of absent-minded all through the meal, and all the way back to the ranch he rode most of the time at a walk, studying. In the morning he told Al Williams he'd draw his pay and quit, and before night he was back at Hermosilla and took the stage from there to Deadwood. From Deadwood he went to Lead and put in a day or two at the Homestake foundry with Billy Lang, who was an old friend of his. He told Billy he wanted to watch the molders and learn a few new cuss words, and he didn't know no better place to combine them educational advantages. Then he went back to Hermosilla and catched Old Man Warren coming out of the Eagle-Bird wiping his mouth, and headed him back in again. They was in there the best part of an hour, in a far corner by themselves; and Enrico talked all that time pretty steady. Finally they got up and shook hands, solemn and ceremonious.

"'Understand, this here is betwixt you and me,' says Enrico as they parted. 'Sedalia ain't to know no more than what I tell her. I'll be over in the morning.'

"'It's a whack,' says the old man.

"According to program Enrico gave Sedalia a surprise visit the first thing in the morning, and she seemed about as glad to see him as he had any right to expect, until he told her that he had jumped his job, after which she cooled off some. 'Of course, forty a month and provender comes close to being an insult to a person with your brains and energy,' she says. 'Still, it ain't apt to hurt like nothing at all and find yourself. But maybe some total stranger has offered you a hundred and double rations.'

"'If he did I'd hurl the offer back in his teeth,' says Enrico. 'I've got my big idea, girl. It's agoing to take brains and energy, like you say I've got, and it's agoing to take grinding toil and nerve strain; but that don't mean nothing to your Enrico when the reward is his Sedalia.'

"'That's very pretty,' says Sedalia. 'And now what's the big idea?'

"'Gypsum,' answers Enrico with a wave of his hand at the hundred and fifty acres scattered round him. 'Here it is, laying round waiting for the magic touch of genius and energy to turn itself into a young mint. Did you know that they made plaster Paris out of gypsum? Did you know that they use it for fertilizer back East and for — lots of things? Are you aware that the railroad is agoing to link with bands of steel this inexhaustible supply with this insatiable demand? That's whatever, girl. I'm agoing to take pa into partnership with me, and after some experimenting, for which I furnish the capital, we're agoing to ship this ranch

to the land of the rising sun in carload lots. Where's pa? I want to put it to him right now.'

"'I think you are crazy,' says Sedalia. 'Pa's out resting in the haymow right now, I reckon. He got a considerable fatigued in town last night, and I judge this would be a good time to talk business with him! Enrico, come back, you coot! He'll kill you.'

"But Enrico had started for the barn. Sedalia stood watching and listening for sights and sounds of trouble, but pretty soon Enrico and pa came out as friendy looking as you please.

"'I will say that Enrico ain't by no means the slouch that I thought he was,' says pa. 'I ain't no rainbow chaser and I don't believe in looking at the bright side of things till your eyes get dazzled, but I like his scheme and I count on him and me making quite a stake out of this property after all.'

"Most generally Sedalia knew about what to expect of pa, but this sure jolted her. Still it took quite a spell to make her think that Enrico knowed what he was a-doing. Whether he knowed or not he certainly humped himself. First off, he packed his bed roll and some grub to an old cabin on the other side of the ridge, that the Stevens boys built for a road house before Hermosilla got started and when there was a road there. To satisfy idle curiosity he gave out that he had took the claim for a homestead, and his reputation for horse sense was such that folks believed him. Still, there was a spring there, as well as a lot of scenery set up on end, and the cabin was so a man could easy live in it after he'd killed off a nest of rattlesnakes that had preëmpted one of the bunks; so inside of half a day

Enrico got settled and began to work on the big idea. As a starter he boarded up an old shed that was off to one end of the Warrens' claim and built a little furnace in it under a steel tank. The old man bossed both jobs and Enrico done the work — according to his own notions. The next thing he hauled wood, cut wood and piled wood until Sedalia cried at the sight of his poor hands and begged him to let up.

"There wasn't no let-up to Enrico though. When the wood job was done he got to work with pick, shovel, gad and bar on the gypsum; and before long he had half of the shed stacked to the roof with slabs and blocks that he'd dug out and hauled on a go-devil that he had made over a road that he'd built through the draws. One busy boy he was. And he wouldn't so much as take a meal at Warren's. Sedalia couldn't hardly force a loaf of bread or a pie on him.

"'What I'm striving for is to fix things so's you won't have to cook for nobody, unless it's for sport,' he says to her. 'Far be it from me to increase your burdens. I'll take this here pie as a keepsake since you've made it for me, but I wouldn't be no such a hog as to eat it.'

"'Take it as a keepsake then,' she says. 'Wear it next to your heart and sleep with it under your pillow if you want to, Enrico dear. You don't have to work that hard for me. You're a foolish boy!'

"'I love to work hard,' he says. 'I'd sooner work than eat.'

"'You're an unblushing liar,' she says. She didn't say it unkind, but just stating facts. 'But you are getting thin,' she says, 'and I don't like it.'

"'That's jealousy, seeing Dick Wade round here so much,' says he —'and the aggravation of having to keep out of his sight.'

"'Pa does most of the entertaining,' says Sedalia. 'I reckon pa isn't so certain that the company's going to be a success after all.'

"'He will be a week from now,' says Enrico. 'We're agoing to start the furnace to-morrow.'

"Sure enough, they started up the furnace next morning and run it under lock and key for three days steady. Sedalia went into the shed once to see how things were looking, but it was mighty hot and uninteresting and somehow she got the impression that she was interrupting proceedings, so she backed out again. The next thing, a Scandinavian gent with no eyebrows to speak of and no finger nails at all came down from Lead City to stay over Sunday. His name was Nels Brakke, and Enrico told Sedalia that he was a plaster-of-Paris expert. He had a kit of tools with him and early in the morning him and Enrico and the old man went into the shed and locked themselves in. Sedalia wanted in, too, but the old man told her she'd better stick close to the house and keep callers away from nosing round. After a while she heard Enrico shrieking and whooping like a mirthful hyena and made out a Scandinavian bass accompaniment to the same while pa was using language that she hadn't heard since the old man drove the ox wagon over the trail from Missouri and struck the gumbo belt.

"All morning that went on, and you can bet that Sedalia's curiosity was stirred a plenty. When the men come in to dinner she questioned them pretty close, but they sort of

dodged and acted silly. Every once in a while Enrico would look at the old man and sort of choke and sputter on his victuals, and when that happened Nels would snort too, and then blush to the roots of his hair, being bashful. Pa would look as savage as a meat ax and say something about cussed fools and what he'd do for two cents. It wasn't no wonder that Sedalia was miffed, and when they started right out for the shed again as soon as they had et she was hopping mad. Dick Wade come round about three o'clock with his campaign buckboard, and if it hadn't been for a strong sense of duty she'd have gone riding with him. As it was she was mighty sweet to him, and when the other boys came stringing along, as per usual, she kept the whole crowd until Enrico had to sneak home through the draws with Nels, without seeing her.

"That night pa gave her another big surprise. When the company had gone he put a couple of kettles of water on the stove to heat and hauled the big washtub into the kitchen.

"'What are you agoing to do, pa?' asks Sedalia.

"'By gosh! I'm agoing to take a bath,' says he.

"Well, Enrico sort of squared himself the next day with the girl, and for two days longer him and pa went on experimenting. Then Enrico told Sedalia he reckoned she was right about him working too hard. 'I notice a sense of fullness after eating,' he says, 'and along about nine or ten o'clock my jaws get to stretching and I'm apt to keel over and lose consciousness for several hours. I don't want to scare you, but I think I'd better take a few days off.'

"Sedalia looked at him kind of thoughtful. 'I was look-

ing for something terrible like this to happen,' she says. 'I s'pose you'll take them few days in town, where you can get cheerful society to break up this here sleeping sickness.'

"'Now you've hurt my feelings,' says Enrico. 'No, ma'am! I just thought of going up Red Cañon for a few days after whitetail. Pa says he'll loan me the wagon for half of the meat.'

"'Oh, if that's all, I'm sorry I spoke,' says Sedalia. 'Don't think I mistrust you, Enrico dear. It's just that the way you've been tearing up the ground lately has made me a mite uneasy. I was afraid it might be just a beautiful dream and I was about due to wake up. Forgive me, darling.'

"Enrico forgave her and started off on his hunting trip that afternoon. He was back again in a couple of days. That was late Thursday night. Friday when the Hermosilla *Hatchet* come out there was a headline clear across the front page:

PRIES UP PETRIFIED PAGAN

ENRICO BILLINGS BARES BURIED BACK NUMBER ON BITTER WATER

"It went on to say that our esteemed, genial and popular fellow citizen, Enrico Billings, had made a discovery that would give him a front-row seat among the most distinguished bone hunters and fossil sharps of this or any other age and put Bitter Water on the map along with the celebrated and well-known places, whose names our readers would readily recall, that were comparatively unknown before the discoveries that made them famous. Mr. Billings,

while out on a hunt in the Red Cañon country, noticed something white sticking up out of the ground close to Bitter Water Creek, and his curiosity being excited he got off his horse to investigate, and with the aid of his picket pin succeeded in unearthing an almost perfect human form that the action of unknown elements through perhaps thousands of years had petrified and turned into stone. With the intelligence and perspicacity that distinguish him, Mr. Billings at once brought up his wagon from his camp, and with superhuman effort skidded this mysterious relic of prehistoric ages up into the box and hauled it back with him. It can now be seen in the back room of Billy Morgan's drug store for an admission fee of four bits, children half price, thus giving Hermosilla the opportunity to inspect this unique legacy of remote ages ahead of an astounded world. Ye editor has had the privilege of seeing it, and it is undoubtedly the remains of a man, but does not seem to bear out the theory that there was giants in them days, being considerable of a runt and scrawny in structure. It was found lying on its left side with one hand pressed to the pit of its stomach, and the expression of its face, which somewhat resembles a chimpanzee's, seems to show that its last moments was not happy. Mr. Billings, who has devoted much time to the study of ethnology, classifies it as brachycephalic, apparently belonging to the melanochroid group, and places the date of its decease somewhere along in the late Miocene age; but our readers — on payment of four bits, strictly cash — can judge of these points for themselves. We understand that Mr. M. E. Warren has purchased a half interest in this marvel. Go to it, boys!

"You can talk all you want to about a town being broke.

Hermosilla was flat busted if you tried to collect anything, but all the same there wasn't a citizen that didn't manage to rustle his little half-wheel somewhere and come a-running to see the petrified man. Old Man Warren, who stood at the door of the back room taking in the coin, had both of his pants pockets loaded down to that extent that he got nervous about his suspenders, and Enrico, inside with the crowd, talked himself plumb hoarse answering questions. When Billy Morgan closed up at supper time they was both about tuckered out.

"Pa wanted to celebrate a little, but Enrico got him into the wagon and headed for home as soon as he had got his mail. The old man hadn't read the piece in the paper then. Enrico told him that he'd be along late after he'd et, and then went on down the street to the *Hatchet* office. Joe Simms, ye ed, was cleaning off the roller of the Washington hand press. He grinned when he saw Enrico.

"'I understand from the latest reports that it pays to advertise,' he says.

"'It sure does!' says Enrico. 'I come here to prove it to you.' He pulled out a neat little roll of bills and skinned it down real liberal. 'I throw in some empty gratitude for them large, fat, tasty words that you put in my mouth too,' he says.

"'Don't name it,' says Joe. 'As long as the old unabridged and the Chambers' cyclopedia hang together, no friend of mine is agoing to suffer from lack of the right dope — as long the subject ain't between G and Kidneys, which volume some son of a tinker has swiped out of the office. Much obliged, Enrico. You can sure count on the aid and comfort of the local press. One born every ten

seconds, ain't there? I wouldn't wonder if you made on this, after all.'

"'My inky-nosed brother is operating his bazoo with two tongues,' says Enrico.

"'Ever hear of the Cardiff Giant?' asks Joe. 'About twenty years ago some unscrupulous persons carved him out of a block of gypsum and claimed they had found him, digging a well. They fooled about the whole U. S. and made a big batch of dough out of him.'

"'You don't tell me!' says Enrico. 'Now ain't that shocking! You mean to say that anybody was ever low-down enough to work a scheme like that? Twenty years ago, eh? Hm-m! Twenty years is a long time, Joe. Lots of folks can't remember that far back.'

"'The heft don't remember back twenty-four hours, when it comes to certain things,' says Joe. 'I wouldn't worry, son.'

"Enrico got up. 'I don't aim to,' he says. 'But there's one thing I want to say — and that's that our brachycephalic bohunkus wasn't carved out of no gypsum, nor carved out of nothing. So long, Joe!'

"'So long!' says Joe. 'You can count on me.'

"Enrico went over to Fred Willor's and slicked up and then got on his horse and rode over to Warren's. He found pa out by the bars, with his chin on the top pole and all of the gladness gone out of his face.

"'What's the matter?' inquires Enrico. 'What for are you meditating out here?'

"'I come out for a recess,' says the old man. 'I'm tired of answering fool questions, and if you want to go in and

spell me with that girl I'll borrow your horse a while afore you unsaddle.'

"'What do you want the horse for?'

"Pa come out with a full-breath bust: 'I'm agoing to ride to town, by gosh! and mop up the *Hatchet* premises with that cockeyed, knock-kneed, type-slinging son of a soup bone, Joe Simms! The slab-sided, slick-scribbling, punkin-subsidized scalawag! I'll learn him! I'll show the oyster-supper-boosting, comp-grabbing, council-grafting, free-drinks deadhead a thing or two! He'll need patent outsides as well as insides when I get through with him! "Considerable of a runt and scrawny in structure," eh? Face like a chimpanzee, is it? And my own daughter reading it aloud, account of me having mislaid my specs! If I don't jam that slayfooted, sticky-fingered faker into the wastebasket and wreck the office, I'm as big a liar as he is!'

"'There, there!' says Enrico; 'you'll feel better now, and there won't be no need of a massacre. Joe means well, but he didn't know that we'd be so sensitive about the personal looks of our discovery. He may have thought that folks would be more interested if they thought it was something horrible.'

"'Am I a back number?' shouts pa.

"'Somebody'll hear you if you holler thataway,' says Enrico. 'If you're a back number you've done mighty well for one afternoon's work. You study on that a while and cool off, and I'll go in and see Sedalia.'

"So he went in to see Sedalia — went with a whoop and threw his hat up in the air and then stood with his arms open, waiting for her to run into them and nestle. Pretty

soon he got tired of waiting and took a step toward her, but she flicked him back with the dish towel and backed that play with a cold, stony look that the petrified man couldn't have beat.

"'We're agoing to have a little talk first,' she says, pointing to a chair. 'Pick up your hat and sit down there and behave. I've missed you something terrible and I'm so glad to see you again that I can't hardly act proper, but I'm going to try. What's this story I hear about you finding a petrified man?'

"'This here is certainly a blow to me,' says Enrico; 'but I'll tell you. You see there was some whitetail tracks leading out of the cañon and over toward Bitter Water, and as I was a-following 'em I seen something sort of sticking up out of the ground, and my curiosity being excited ——'

"'I know all that by heart,' Sedalia says calmly. 'Now you tell me one thing: You say you dug up ——'

"'The luckiest find I ever made in my life, excepting when I found you,' says Enrico. 'Pa and me has taken in close to ninety dollars already, and we'll double that tomorrow, and —— What for are you pointing your finger at me, honey?'

"'Who buried what you dug up?' says honey. 'You tell me that, Enrico Billings!'

"'Darling,' says Enrico, 'I ain't but twenty-five years old and you can't expect me to be posted on what happened twenty-five centuries ago. If it was something halfway recent I might hunt up the undertaker and get you a list of the pall-bearers, but you're asking too much.'

"'How much did pa pay you for his half interest, and where did he get the money?' she goes on.

"'Sho!' says Enrico; 'ain't pa and me partners? He furnishes the wagon, come to that.'

"'What did pa use two boxes of axle grease for a-Sunday, and how did he get that plaster in his hair, and what were you men laughing about, and why did pa take a bath?'

"'Why, sweetheart, don't you think pa would know without me guessing?' says Enrico. 'Why not ask pa?'

"'I have,' she says. 'So you've give up hard work and the plaster-of-Paris business?'

"'Why, no, pretty one!' says Enrico. 'Whatever put that into your dear little head? Far from it and quite the contrary. The plaster business takes capital, though, and we'd just used up all the capital I had. We was just a-talking and wondering what we would do, when here this petrified man drops on us from a clear sky. By the time I've taken him round a while we'll have capital to start the plaster business just a-whooping. I reckon I'll start out about Tuesday and work the Hills camps and towns.'

"Sedalia got up and walked over to her bedroom. 'I hope you'll have a pleasant journey,' she says. 'Good-by!'

"She slipped into the bedroom and shut and locked the door. Enrico tried to talk to her through the keyhole, but the line seemed to be out of order and he got discouraged, and when pa came in and tried his hand at remonstrating, with equal poor luck, he gave up and went back to town.

"Pa showed up at the drug store in time for the opening of business next morning and didn't bring no glad tidings with him. Sedalia, seemed like, didn't approve of the petrified man and hadn't no idea of connecting herself with him by marriage, and all bets based on that proposition was declared off. That was about the size and dimensions of

it, pa said. 'What's more,' says pa, 'she won't hear to me touring the Hills with you, nor no other place. I reckon I'll have to be a silent partner in this here, Enrico.'

"Enrico said he'd talk it over with her that evening, and right away him and pa got too busy to pursue the subject. They had to go out to dinner one at a time while Billy Morgan spelled them, the rush was such; and at supper time a bunch of the boys from the Circle-Bar rode in, arriving simultaneous with five hand cars full of micks from the grading camp at the falls and a message to pa from Sedalia saying that she'd shut up the chickens and gone a-visiting for a few days with a neighbor and for him to feed the cat and there was bread enough to do him in the oven.

"'She don't say where she's gone visiting,' says Enrico.

"'No,' says Pa. 'It might be with Mis' Gibson at Ash Creek, or it might be the Wolcotts at Cascade, or the Lowdens on Coffee Flat — or anywheres. Wherever it is, it's my notion that she won't be back until this here show is out of town. These here fool women!'

"'Don't say that,' says Enrico. 'Sedalia ain't no fool — and that's the trouble. She's too high-minded and white-souled and tender-conscienced to understand business, that's all, bless her! What will we do now, pa?'

"'I reckon you'd better light out for the upper Hills,' says pa. 'They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, and I can keep you posted while you're gone. We'll have an evening performance here for the boys, and continuous tomorrow, and by that time Hermosilla will be about cleaned up. Anyway, we can make a return date for any small change we've missed.'

"'I don't know,' says Enrico. 'They say out of sight, out of mind, and if Sedalia keeps set as she is —— Well, I guess I'll take a chance and see what happens.'

"Several things happened. On Monday Enrico hired Lou Green and Sam Whitacre for assistant lecturers and ticket-office clerks and, with the Petrified Pagan rolled up in a tarp in brand-new wagon, hit the trail acquiring capital as he went. Wednesday Sedalia got back from her visit and rolled up her sleeves to clean house after pa. Friday the *Hatchet* noted Dick Wade had returned from his canvass of the Oelrichs Precinct and reported that according to conservative estimates a majority of no less than thirty votes would be rolled up for the Democratic ticket in Oelrichs alone. The same evening Dick sat on the porch of the M. E. Warren ranch and done his level best to make Miss Sedalia Warren like him. Taking it all round he seemed to be making a tolerable good job of it. Anyway, pa got uneasy enough to join the merry group and turn the conversation to politics. When Dick finally went pa told daughter that he was ashamed of her.

"'Carrying on with a no-account office seeker!' he says.

"'That ain't all,' says Sedalia. 'He's an officeholder and an office getter, and he's agoing to be our next sheriff and a terror to evildoers and frauds and such. I don't know whether he'd let his wife's relations stand between him and his sworn duty — if he had a wife — but from what he said I don't believe he would.'

"'What did he say?' asks pa. 'Anything about the petrified man?'

"'Nothing particular,' says Sedalia. 'He's got some sense; and when he seen the subject was unpleasant to me

he dropped it. But I think he was real sorry that you was mixed up in it.'

"'Huh!' says the old man with a grin. 'I guess he is! Know how much Enrico took out of Buffalo Gap?'

"'I ain't interested in Enrico,' she says.

"'You've changed your mind a heap,' says pa.

"'You've changed yours a heap about Dick,' she says. 'I don't aim to be undutiful, but I wish you'd let Dick and me alone.'

"The way she said it, pa judged it best to say nothing, but he kept up a devil of a thinking. Next day he brought Sedalia a letter and package from Enrico, but she didn't open either of them — not while pa was round anyway. Along in the afternoon Dick made another call, but pa didn't talk so violent as he had the day before, although he gave Dick to understand that he was too numerous, about as plain as a man can without saying much. All the same, he wrote to Enrico that Sedalia acted as if she was tickled to death to get his letter, and he allowed that she was weakening.

"Enrico was at Rapid by that time, doing a land-office business and sending drafts to pa regular. Joe Simms, the *Hatchet* man, looking over his exchanges, seen that his piece about the Bitter Water Back Number was copied all over the territory, and even the Sioux City and Omaha papers had it in. *The Sioux City Journal* did mention the Cardiff Giant with insinuations, and *The Fargo Argus* joshed a considerable, but mostly the newspaper boys took a sort of pride in the find and gave it a good send-off, especially after Professor Thornby, of the School of Mines, come out in an interview and indorsed the Miocene theory to the extent of

two columns. Enrico stayed quite a while in Rapid and then went on to Deadwood, and the report he sent from there put a grin a foot wide under pa's whiskers.

"All the same, Dick Wade worried pa a heap. Dick hadn't said nothing to him about Enrico, only to ask kind of particular when he was a-coming back. He seemed real anxious about that — but there wasn't hardly a day that he didn't get round to sit a while with Sedalia, and Sedalia wasn't never too busy to give him a little time. Enrico kept a-writing to her steady, and there was most as many packages as letters from him, but she never let on to pa about them. Then came election, and Dick was elected sheriff.

"Pa went to town to vote against him of course, and stopped over for the returns. Next morning he found another letter from Enrico in his pocket, that he'd overlooked in the excitement. Enrico was at Lead and allowed that there wasn't no falling off in attendance — so far, and that the receipts was considerable over the expenditures. He mentioned that he had sent fifty dollars to Nels Brakke from Rapid and had just found out that Nels went on a big spree as soon as he got it, and then resigned from the foundry, observing that he had a soft snap and was going to work for Nels henceforth. After which he left town.

"Then Enrico says: 'You keep on telling me that Sedalia is a-weakening, but I don't see no signs of it. She don't answer my letters, and if them little tricks I've been sending has found favor in her eyes I ain't got no means of telling it. I've a big notion to take old Hard-pan back to Hermosilla for that return date right away, for I'm a heap easier financially than I am in my mind. What in thunder makes you think she's weakening?'

"Pa put the letter back in his pocket and braced Sedalia. His hair was a-pulling considerable, but he made out to speak soft and gentle. 'Little girl,' he says, 'what for don't you write to poor Enrico and cheer him up a few? There he is, sad and lonely, long miles away, a-toiling and a-slaving to pile up money for you, a-writing to you every day and a-sending you fond tokens of affection, and you don't let out a grunt. I ain't asking you to slop over or take back anything, but that boy's big, warm heart is a-breaking, and the least you could do would be to act polite like a lady. Now ain't it?'

"'See here, pa!' says Sedalia. 'You can tell that poor, sad, lonely, broken-hearted partner of yours that he's wasting postage, paper, wrappings and string sending letters and tokens of affections to me. I can use wood in the stove just as well, and get more heat. If he gets too lonesome with his petrified man maybe he can dig up a petrified woman. By the way, I'm going riding with Dick Wade this afternoon and you may have to get your own supper.'

"Pa didn't say nothing to that in her hearing, but he put out for the barn, his mouth shut hard, his eyes popping, and his general complexion between a warm red and a rich purple. He walked quick, but it was just as well the barn wasn't no farther off. There was an innocent little calf a-standing chewing its cud in his line of march, and that calf caught a sight of pa's face and gave one blat of terror and streaked for the Battle Mountain Range, sailing over a five-foot pole fence as if it wasn't nothing but a line chalked on the ground. What pa said in the barn didn't set fire to the fodder, but it would have sure made an insurance company nervous. Then he had a long spell of thinking,

and as a result he wrote to Enrico that there wasn't no need nor sense in him starting back as long as public interest in prehistoric relics was unabated.

"'The reason I think she's weakening is that I know blame well she is,' he says. 'Just for one thing, to-day she made some remarks about you seeking the society of other women up there that looked like she was a-getting worried. I don't say she ain't mad yet, but she'll get over that all the quicker if you stay away and quit writing.'

"A week later Jack Skinner, a well-known ranchman of Point-of-Rocks, Custer County, was a-riding after horses on French Creek when his horse stumbled on something white sticking up out of the ground and throwed Mr. Skinner over his head. When he come to, Mr. Skinner investigated and found that the cause of the accident was the petrified remains of some antediluvian aborigine what had remained hidden for uncounted ages until this fortuitous chance happening brought it to light. Mr. N. Brakke, a mining man from the upper hills, was with Mr. Skinner at the time and helped dig up the ancient stiff, which is now on exhibition in Paul Klemman's wareroom for twenty-five cents per exhib.

"That was in the Custer *Chronicle,* where Joe Simms, the *Hatchet* man, seen it. Joe clipped out the piece, but he didn't print it, and he kept his mouth shut about it. He didn't say nothing when, soon after that, a prominent sodbuster, of Vermilion, while digging a well, struck his pick into what proved to be the shoulderblade of a lapidified human form that a Swedish scientist by the name of Brakke pronounced a genuine antique. All Joe done was to grin and paste the clippings in the back of his daybook.

"Pa still kept watch faithful, but what he seen of Sedalia and Dick didn't put no flesh on his bones. Every time he mentioned anything about Enrico, the girl would talk about Dick Wade; and she'd talk about Dick Wade if he didn't mention Enrico. The way she primped for Dick was as sinful as it was unnecessary, and about an hour before Dick come — and he was coming tolerable regular — she'd act as restless as a pea in a skillet and look out of the window every twenty seconds or so to see if he wasn't looming on the horizon.

"Finally pa concluded that he'd watch the horizon some himself, and as soon as Dick loomed pa aimed a little to the right and low and cut loose. Dick stopped short. Pa whanged away again and knocked up the dust about six inches to the left. Dick hollered something, but pa couldn't hear just what he said. What Dick heard next was a loud humming noise right over his head, and he judged it best to turn his horse round and go back to town. Not that he was scared — he wasn't naturally scary, Dick wasn't; but he had awful good sense about some things. Pa chuckled to himself and, leaving the old gun cached in the plum bushes, he went back to the house and found Sedalia putting on her best hat.

"'Where are you going, girl?' he asks.

"'I'm going to town,' says Sedalia, 'where it will be safe for folks to see me,' she says. 'I'm free, white and sweet nineteen; and I claim I can pick my company without the aid or consent of any parent whatever. A girl may be good-looking and attractive, which I don't say I'm not, but I don't want any handicap of being known as a death risk at five hundred yards.'

"'Don't talk foolish, girl, and don't drive your old father to extreme measures,' says pa.

"'I'll drive myself — or I'll ride Patsy,' says she.

"'Well, I'll drive you in,' says pa, and he hikes out to the barn and turns her Patsy horse and one of the team horses loose on the range. Then he climbs the only other horse there was left and put out for town himself. 'By gosh!' he says; 'I've got to get Enrico back if he has to leave a thousand dollars a day receipts. Here's where I burn the wires between this and Central City, and if I can't keep Dick stood off till the boy gets here I'll buy a couple more boxes of axle grease and eat 'em.'

"He didn't do no telegraphing, though, as it happened. About the first person he seen in town was Dick Wade. Dick didn't make no move, forward or back, but waited for him to come up. 'Howdy, Dick!' says pa. 'Why don't you come to see us?'

"'I figure on doing so, as soon as the road is open,' says Dick. 'I left my opener at home the last time, but I don't aim to be so forgetful the next time,' he says. 'How are you feeling, Mr. Warren?'

"'Poorly, sir, poorly!' says pa. 'My right eye is a-troubling me and my hand and arm ain't so steady as I could wish. They'll improve though. Yes, they'll improve, all right. Health is a great thing, Dick. Always take care of your health and keep out of unhealthy places.'

"'That's good advice,' says Dick. 'Jails is generally conceded to be unhealthy, but some folks don't seem to care whether they keep out of jail or not. How is Miss Sedalia?'

"'Sort of out of sorts,' says pa. 'I guess she'll be all

right pretty soon though. Enrico Billings is a-coming back. She ain't been like the same girl since he went.'

"Dick pricked up his ears. 'Coming back, is he?' says he. 'When do you expect him?'

"'Why, most any minute,' says pa. 'You see——'

"He stopped short. There come a squeal of brakes from the grade the other side of the creek, and here was a covered wagon a-sliding down to the bridge with BITTER WATER PETRIFIED MAN in big letters along the canvas!

"'By gosh!' says pa, slapping his leg; 'there's Enrico now!'

"Pa set off hotfoot for the bridge, and Dick Wade watched him for a minute and then struck off down the street and went into Doc Minnifer's office. Doc was busy with a patient, so Dick sat down in the waiting room and waited, with one eye on Billy Morgan's drug store, which he could see from the window. Pretty soon the covered wagon drove up to Billy's side door and Enrico and pa and Billy and a couple of other men lifted out something long and hefty rolled up in a tarpoleon, and carried it in. Dick Wade grinned and licked his lips. Then he rolled him a cigarette and continued to wait.

"Ten minutes from that, Enrico and pa come out of the drug store together.

"'I tell you I was just agoing to telegraph you,' says pa. 'I ain't to blame. I allowed she was letting him come round just out of pastime.'

"'Sure!' says Enrico, kind of sarcastic. 'It would have been a pity to have took my mind off of business when I

was doing so well. I'm glad I got that note. Whoever it was wrote it was a friend of mine.'

"'What did it say?' asks pa.

"'A plenty!' says Enrico. 'Just that unless I thought more of my stone man than I did of my flesh-and-blood girl I'd better hustle back afore Dick Wade got her.'

"'I wish I knew who wrote it,' says pa. 'I'd sure make the no-name, black-hand backbiter hard to resuscitate. It's a lie! I don't say that shooting at Dick was good policy, but as soon as I seen I'd made a mistake and there was a chance of anything happening I sent for you — or I was agoing to. That's no lie.'

"They was just passing the *Hatchet* office and Joe Simms rapped on the window and beckoned hard for them to come in. Enrico shook his head, but Joe made more signs, so he went in, pa trailing along after. 'I'm in a rush, Joe,' says Enrico. 'I'll look in again later on.'

"'I won't keep you a minute,' says Joe. 'I seen you only just come in a little while ago, so it's likely you don't know about all your brother capitalists and big bugs that's just arrived on a special car from Chicago with the V. P., the G. P. A., the G. F. A. and other prominent initials of the F. E.'

"'I didn't hear of it,' says Enrico. 'Much obliged for informing me. Tell 'em I'm sorry I was too busy to see 'em and I hope they'll make themselves at home. See you later.'

"'Sit down, dog-gone you!' says Joe. 'Give me time to say a word. The whole gang is in the Eagle-Bird club-room right now, and I want to take you over and introduce

you. I'm on the entertainment committee and I want to entertain them with a private view of your Paleozoic Piute.'

"'See here, Joe Simms,' says pa, breaking in, 'a joke's a joke and I can take one with the next fellow, but when you get to talking about Piutes, with personal applications, I'll be gol-swizzled if ——'

"'Pa,' says Enrico, 'you take a tumble to yourself and hush. Joe didn't mean nothing personal, and you're delaying the game.'

"'What's devouring him?' asks Joe. 'Well, anyway, it's up to us to show these gentlemen our manufactures and industries and enterprises, and you've brought back yours right in the nick of time before such is a common spectacle and ——'

"Enrico interrupts him. 'What do you mean by "manufactures" and "common spectacles"?' says he.

"'I thought you was keeping posted on the market,' says Joe. 'Up to date there's about eighteen perfectly preserved petrified persons been discovered, and more a-coming. It's got so a rancher can't ride out after stock nowheres without his horse kicking against a petrified shoulder blade or something, and if he digs a well it's an even break whether he strikes water or a remarkable object of scientific interest. Look over them clippings, and while you're doing that I'll go and tell the crowd. Over at the drug store, ain't it?'

"Without waiting for an answer Joe lit out for the Eagle-Bird clubroom. Pa sat with his jaw sagging while Enrico run his eye through the notices of discoveries.

"'Well,' says Enrico at last, 'I'm agoing to see Sedalia. It looks as if there were a lot of fake fossils being exhumed

and as if that squarehead, Nels Brakke, was largely responsible for the outrageous fraud on a credulous public. But we'll talk that over. You can go up to Billy Morgan's and do the honors if you want. I'm agoing to see Sedalia before Dick Wade ——'

"'Enrico Billings in there?' somebody hollers. The next thing in busts Billy Morgan panting for breath and with the sweat rolling down his red face.

"'Enrico,' says he, 'that blamed saphead, Dick Wade, is a-holding an inquest on your petrified man and I reckon it will be a pious idea for you to attend as a witness.'

"It seemed like that about a minute after Enrico and pa had left the drug store Dick Wade and Doc Minnifer arrived there, looking mighty important. 'Billy,' says Dick, 'it has come to my official notice, as duly elected and qualified and holding-over coroner of this here county, that you have here on these premises the *corpse delicti* of a person to the deponent unknown, the cause of whose decease is also unknown, and which was found by one Enrico Billings within the borders and jurisdiction of the county aforesaid. Me and doc are here, ex officio, to view the said remains and to take such steps as we may deem necessary. In the back room, ain't it?'

"'It's in the back room, but I don't know about you seeing it right now,' says Billy. 'Enrico and Old Man Warren didn't figure on opening the show until to-morrow. Better wait until one of them gets back. I guess it will be all right then.'

"'Billy,' says Wade, 'this here is the law, and don't you

monkey with the law or put no obstructions in its way. We are agoing to sit on these remains right now — not to-morrow nor yet ten minutes from now.'

"'You want to sit as bad as a broody hen,' says Billy. 'What do you figure on hatching?'

"'Never you mind!' says Dick. 'You remember I'm coroner until I'm inaugurated sheriff in March. Stand aside, Billy! Come on, doc!'

"He pushed past Billy, and doc followed him into the back room, where the petrified man was reposing on a platform that had been built for it. Dick pulled the tarpoleon off it, at the same time removing his hat, and doc took his old lid off likewise. It was sure a solemn-looking object. In life it might have been a man of about five foot nothing much, with thin, knobby legs and arms and kind of humped-shouldered. Its features were sort of doubtful, but you could easy make 'em out, and the chin was long, like there was kind of whiskers on it. It laid sidewise and one knee was a little drawed up. All over, it was kind of rough-skinned and stained greenish here and there. Billy Morgan pointed out the toenails and finger nails, which was real distinct, except on one hand.

"'He looks natural, don't he?' says Billy.

"'I suppose there ain't no doubt of him being dead, doc?' says Dick Wade.

"Doc tried to dig his thumb into an arm. 'I guess the ordinary tests ain't to be relied on,' he says. 'All the same I wouldn't hesitate to say that he was totally defunct; in fact, I'd stake my professional reputation on it. The *rigor mortis* is unmistakable.'

"'In that case we've got to find out what done it,' says

Wade. 'There's a dent in his cabeza that seems to point to foul play, but he's badly pitted and it might be smallpox. We hadn't ought to take chances of an epidemic of smallpox in this community, had we, doc?'

"Doc clawed his whiskers. 'Hard to tell what it is without an autopsy,' he said. 'The way his leg is drawed up and his hand pressed to his abdomen is symptomatic of cholera,' he says. 'It might be Asiatic cholera. There ain't no doubt that the original settlers in this here continent was Asiatics.'

"'Autopsy goes then!' says Dick, pulling a stone hammer from under his coat. 'We can call a jury after it's over.'

"Billy Morgan tried to stop the proceedings there, but he seen he wasn't going to succeed, so he started after Enrico. Dick hauled off and brought down the hammer with a whack and then dropped it and held his elbow.

"'Well!' he says. 'That's certainly one hard citizen!'

"He shook the feeling back to his arm and then picked up the hammer again and started in more cautious. In five minutes he had the limbs amputated and a cross section of the cholera district exposed. From that on the dissection was tolerably easy, but there was several pieces considerable larger than a walnut left of the subject when Enrico and pa came busting in something like Yellow Creek the time the big dam gave way.

"Enrico was first, and he struck Dick Wade with a seventy-five-mile velocity and a pressure of a hundred pounds to the square inch. Dick landed on a carboy of wood alcohol, and he claimed afterward that it was the fumes that really knocked him out. Doc Minnifer was standing back laughing his old fat head off when pa pasted him, and doc's face hurt him too bad to even smile for close on to three

months after. For the time being his sense of humor was nothing but a gory pulp. Wade got to his feet and swung the stone hammer, but unfortunately for him he missed his lick, and Enrico hit him with great force and violence, not to speak of celerity, about twenty-eight times, three of the times while Dick was in a nearly perpendicular position and the rest while he was more or less horizontal. Doc Minnifer got the side door open by that time and went out without troubling to close it behind him, with pa a close second. Dick Wade went out the same way, but with Enrico's able assistance, and he lit similar to a sack of oats. Considering the amount of action and the results, it was about the rapidest ruction on record.

"When it was over, Enrico sat down on the platform, sort of slumped, and gazed mournfully at the fragments of his hopes. Then he looked up and seen that the end of the room nearest the prescription case was all jammed up with a hushed and awe-struck mob of witnesses in tailor-made clothes, many of them wearing side whiskers and diamonds and other evidences of wealth. Joe Simms, the *Hatchet* man, was on the edge of the herd and he stepped forward.

"'I brought these here gentlemen to see your justly celebrated petrified man, Mr. Billings,' he says.

"'There he is,' says Enrico sadly, waving his hand at the litter. 'Help yourselves, gentlemen! Take some of him along as souvenirs if you care to; but if you'll excuse me I want to think.'

"He rested his chin on his hands and forgot them while they crowded round and Billy Morgan and pa explained things. After a while somebody touched him on the shoulder. It was the V. P. of the F. E., a kind gentleman with

a white waistcoat draped with half a yard of gold watch chain.

"'Sir,' says the V. P., 'I want to express my sympathy and at the same time congratulate you on your efficiency as a double-handed pivot-action scrapper. I should be proud to shake hands with you.'

"'Don't mention it,' says Enrico wearily. 'You're welcome any time.' He gave the V. P. a limp hand and then dropped his chin and went on thinking. After a while there was another touch on his shoulder. This time it was a lean gent with eyeglasses, who was holding a piece of the bohunkus' left ear in his hand. 'Excuse me,' says this one. 'My name is Westerman — Henry Westerman, of the Westerman Hard Plaster Company, in Omaha. My curiosity is excited ——'

"'So was mine,' says Enrico with a sigh. 'That's how it all begun.'

"'—— by the composition of this here,' says Mr. Westerman. 'I've just took the liberty of pounding a bit of it up,' he says. 'If you can give me any information regarding the same it might be worth your while.'

"'It was discovered near the south fork of Bitter Water,' says Enrico in a sort of dreamy voice. 'I happened to see something sticking up out of the ground and, my curiosity being excited ——'

"'Just so — exactly!' says Mr. Westerman. 'That part of it is all right. Now isn't there some quiet place you and me can go to and talk plain and confidential? This may mean business.'

"Enrico looked at him and seemed to come to life all of a sudden. 'Wait a moment,' he says, and went over and

spoke to pa. Then he came back to Westerman. 'All right,' says he. 'I guess I can spare you half an hour just as well as not.'

"It took considerably more than an hour, the way it turned out, for Enrico and this Eastern party to do their talking; and after they was through Enrico found he had some more business to attend to, so that he didn't get to see Sedalia that night after all. All the same, he was round to Old Man Warren's reasonably early in the morning. Pa wasn't nowhere round, but he found Sedalia in the kitchen, where she was singing a happy little song and finishing up the breakfast dishes with her back turned toward him.

"She didn't look round when she heard his step. 'Sit down, Dick!' she says. 'I'll be through in a minute.'

"'Dick ain't able to come this morning,' says Enrico. 'He's sort of indisposed. I'll sit down and wait for you though.'

"She turned round sharp at this. 'Oh, it's you!' she says with a raise of her eyebrows and a forty-below tone of voice. 'How do you do, Mr. Billings? I'm sorry, but pa is out hunting a calf that got away. If there's any word you'd like to leave ——'

"'I'll be here when he gets back, thank you, Miss Sedalia,' says Enrico, mighty sober and polite; 'but what I come here for, special, not counting a business engagement that I've got with an Eastern gentleman, is to tell you that I'm through with petrified men for keeps. As betwixt a petrified man and a flesh-and-blood angel there ain't but one choice possible for me. I don't want you to think I don't appreciate strictly honorable sentiments, such as a noble-minded lady like you that ain't had no business experience

would naturally entertain, and I own up that I done wrong to do what I done. Two thousand five hundred dollars clear of expenses ain't no excuse, but now I see plain how you feel about it I've quit.'

"'Was you threatened with arrest up in the Hills if you didn't?' asks Sedalia.

"'I was not,' says Enrico. 'I was doing right well there. Nobody ever catched me lying flat-footed, and that's the truth. I came back account of you. "I'll humbly ask her to forgive me," I says to myself. I don't deny that Dick Wade held an inquest on our stock in trade yesterday and smashed it up to smithereens with a stone hammer, but my intentions was to get shut of it anyway.'

"'Oh!' says Sedalia. Just 'Oh!' was all she said for a moment, but she put the end of her thumb between her teeth and seemed to study on that information. 'You say Dick is indisposed?' she says.

"'Sort of under the weather,' says Enrico. 'You must have been disappointed,' he says.

"'Well, not exactly,' says Sedalia. 'You see, I knew it was you. You got back yesterday, didn't you? I know you did, from the way pa acted. Anything more you want to own up to, Enrico?'

"'That petrified man was artificial,' says Enrico. 'We made him out in the shed. It was a kind of a casting of pa. We greased pa and put him into what they call a flask — which was reverse English from the way pa had always used flasks. Then we packed sand round him and got his impression in two sections. That Swede was a molder, and he done the fine work. That's the whole truth of it.'

"'Anyway, you came back,' says Sedalia. She lifted up

her eyes sort of bashful and blushed all over her face and neck. 'You must have started the minute you got that anonymous letter,' she says.

"She made a jump and tried to get away the moment she said it, but Enrico caught her, and after a furious struggle that was prolonged for as much as half a second she gave in, and the conversation wasn't renewed for considerable of a while.

"Finally, though, Sedalia got her fingers twisted with a good holt in Enrico's hair and squirmed part ways out of his embrace. 'You coot!' she says. 'Why didn't you tell me about it from the start? Of course I'm noble-minded, but I hope I've got some sense, and I guess you gave everybody the worth of their money. If I hadn't guessed about what you'd done I'd have give fifty cents to have seen it myself.'

"She gave his head a shake and went on: 'Another thing, I meant to make you into a wealthy and respected citizen myself, and you go to work and take the job into your own hands without telling me. Ain't you ashamed? And Dick Wade coming round all the time while you was gone didn't make a particle of difference to you! You stay away just the same, no matter what I do. Didn't pa tell you how I was carrying on with him? I don't care; you came when you thought you had to. But why did you wait until this morning to come and apologize? I suppose you half killed poor Dick Wade. I hope you did.'

"'Honey,' says Enrico, 'you sure make a high score when you start guessing, but you won't have to guess from this out. Seems like I've got the only mountain of some sort of silicate sand in the whole round world on that claim of mine

over the ridge, and that sand is the only thing that you can mix up with gypsum plaster in a certain way to make a certain first-class, number-one kind of cement that's in extra demand. I didn't come last night because I had to file on that claim right away to cinch it. In an hour from now I expect a gentleman to look over that sand mountain and pa's gypsum deposits, and six months from now you won't be able to see the ranch for the solid tracks and gypsum factories on it. Didn't I tell you I was going into the plaster business?'

"He looked at his watch and stuffed it back into his vest pocket in a hurry. 'Honey,' says he, 'let's make the most of that hour.'

"And I reckon that's about all," concluded the old bull-whacker. "Of course folks don't stop living after they get married; but shucks! who cares? They make the most of their hour, and then the business engagement comes along and grabs 'em, and we sort of lose interest. Enrico got his sidetracks and his plaster factory, and back there in Omaha he's reaching out and getting more things all the time. Sedalia has got about everything she can think of wanting, I guess; but I doubt if them sixty golden minutes set with thirty-six hundred diamond seconds that Westerman busted into wasn't more satisfactory than any times they've had since. They got rich."

"Well, that's a right instructive story," said the Bar-T boy, throwing his skull up in the air and catching it. "It goes to show that this here is a world of deceit and skin games."

The stock tender made a movement of decided impatience,

"Let up on that!" he snarled. "You may not know that there was an Iowa family massacred by the Indians near Medicine Butte in '79, and anyway human relics ain't to play ball with. Give that here!"

"Wait a minute and don't get worked up!" said the Bar-T boy, waving him off. He thumbed a cigarette paper from a book that he drew from his pocket and then snapped back the upper section of the skull's frontal and parietal bones, disclosing a neat cavity filled with tobacco.

"Paper ma-shay," he said with a grin. "A cigar drummer gave it to me in the agency store yesterday. I thought you old suckers would bite, sooner or later."

II

GETTING EVEN

WHEN the old bullwhacker drew bridle at the Box Elder stage station, having ridden six miles from his river claim merely to refresh himself with the rare music of human speech, he emitted his customary bloodcurdling howl to call the stock tender's attention to his arrival. The stock tender, however, instead of cheerfully responding with his own interpretation of the wild Sioux war cry, as he usually did, made a sudden appearance at the harness-room door and flung a currycomb at his visitor's head, at the same time sh-sh-sh-sh-ing like an overcharged locomotive relieving itself of a dangerous pressure of steam.

"Is the baby asleep?" queried the old man in a hoarse whisper as he stiffly dismounted.

The stock tender's frown gave place to a wide grin.

"You've called the turn," he replied in the same hushed tone.

"Give the old plug a forkful of hay and then come in and take a tiny peek at the little darling. He looks too cute for anything! Step light, now!"

He presently led the way back to the harness room, which was also his sleeping apartment. Tip Yoakum, a gangling, red-bearded granger from Hat Creek, was sitting in a back-tilted chair close to the bunk, and he raised a

warning finger as the two entered. Simultaneously a gentle snore proceeded from the bunk and the old bullwhacker, advancing a cautious step or two, saw a young man lying extended on the stock tender's blankets and sunk in profound slumber.

The very peculiar thing about the young man was his face, which was dotted and streaked in a strikingly original pattern with red ocher and black harness dressing. Alternate bars of black and red ran horizontally across the sleeper's forehead; his nose was of a vivid red, with jet black at the tip, suggesting the claw of a lobster; crescents and crosses filled the cheek space and joined two circles with central dots on the rounded chin. After a few moments' silent inspection the old bullwhacker raised his beetling eyebrows inquiringly. The stock tender answered with the complacent smile of the true artist who knows his work is good.

"The angels are whispering to him," he murmured as a slight spasm contorted the slumberer's ochered mouth. "Let's go, boys; I don't want to have to walk the floor with him."

When they were comfortably seated in the shade of the old cottonwood outside the station the old bullwhacker asked who the wearied pilgrim on the bunk might be.

"Dickie Pollett, one of the Z Bell boys," replied the stock tender. "They had poor Dickie on night herd all through the storm last night, and the bunch broke away eighteen times with a conservative average of five miles a break before they could be headed off. On top of that, Bill Timmy hazes the long-suffering son-of-a-gun down here to meet Owens, on the stage, with a spare horse to carry him to camp. Well,

the stage being probably the other side of Pass Creek and the road being so they've most likely got hell as well as high water to wrastle with, Dickie allowed he'd have a few hours to pound his ear, which he has been doing since I fed him. He's a sound sleeper, Dickie is." The stock tender chuckled. "He'll wake up when the stage gets in, though. They'll be some strangers on the stage, as like as not, who won't know no better than to make rude personal remarks about the looks of folks. I sort of expect a little break in the monotony of our dull lives when that stage pulls in and Dickie comes out. Yes, sir, gentlemen, I wouldn't be surprised at most anything in the line of excitement. I judge Dickie to be sensitive and maybe a little apt to take offense."

"I reckon you're right," said the old bullwhacker, "if he's the Dick Pollett that mangled Tribulation Simmons up a mess last fall; and I guess he must be. And they did say that Simmons was a hard man to handle. I disremember whether he got well or not. Did you hear, Tip?"

The Hat Creek granger shook his head.

"I didn't hear," he said gravely.

"And didn't he about half kill Crookneck Nillson on Coffee Flat last calf round-up? Seems to me that boy's name was Pollett. Why, yes. And if they hadn't pulled him off —— Sure! I've got him placed now. Nillson played some little harmless joke on him, and Simmons just made a kind of innocent remark. Oh, he's bad medicine! Sort of reminds me of Billy the Kid. I didn't reco'nize him as he was asleep there, account of Hank's art decoration; but I got him placed. I remember seeing him when he was on trial for manslaughter at Cheyenne. I wouldn't be surprised at 'most anything myself. Know him well, Hank?"

"You make me tired!" said the stock tender.

"What seems to me sort of onusual is Dick's size," observed the old bullwhacker. "'Most all the cut-ups and humorous jokers I've ever met up with has been husky, two-fisted devils, about a foot taller than the run, with a ringing laugh like a burro at sunrise and a bold, reckless spirit bordering on rashness — like Pete Wallaby. Sometimes they'd live to get over it naturally, as sense come with the passing years, and sometimes they was cut off in the flower of their youths by neck yokes or three-legged stools or shotguns, or the like — whatever come handiest to the man that couldn't take a joke.

"One of the comicalest boys I ever knew, except Pete Wallaby, was cut off by a circus elephant that he had been feeding peanuts to. A few of the peanuts was loaded with red pepper. If he had played that same joke on a small-sized monkey that boy might have been alive to-day, filling the world with sunshine and horselaughs and mortal enemies; but no, he had to pick on an elephant of Scotch descent that was a considerable bigger than he was himself. Still, you can't 'most always sometimes tell. Jessie Tarrant wasn't no Siberian mammoth in point of size."

The stock tender said he wasn't acquainted with the lady, and what about her, anyway?

"She didn't have no sense of humor," replied the old bullwhacker. "You might have thought she had, to look at her, because she had a pair of these yer kind of bright black eyes that always seems to be twinkling when they ain't snapping; and she smiled easy and often, and laughed like she enjoyed it. But she was mighty deceiving, just the same. Pete found that out. First off, he thought his frolic-

some ways was what had made a hit with her; and I reckon they did, only they didn't hit her in the right place."

Here the stock tender interrupted again to request an introduction to Pete. It might be that they had never met and never would, but it was handy to have particulars to check up by if necessary.

"Pete Wallaby was the champeen bronco-buster of the Flying V when Shorty Williams run the outfit," the old bullwhacker particularized. "He was then twenty-two years of age, dark complected, good-looking, six foot one and three-quarter inches in his stocking feet, and weighed a hundred and eighty-seven pounds in the working season, when all his fat was in his head. He was as quick as a cat, and a fancy shot with a six-gun; so that 'most everybody took his jokes good-natured and nothing serious ever happened to him until he run acrost Jessie Tarrant at the Blueblanket dance that they had to celebrate the new city hall before they put the partitions in.

"You might say Pete was popular and well thought of. It just depends on whether you was raised to be truthful or not. The Flying V cook, Bert Askins, hadn't much use for him, account of his putting the salt in the sugar can and vice versa, and changing the soda and baking powder round, substituting coal oil for lemon extract. One time he got into the kitchen just before Bert spread himself to show a party of visiting Eastern stockholders what a real range cook, with red-flannel underwear, could do.

"Red Richardson wasn't never real friendly with Pete after Pete pulled the chair away from him just as he was going to sit down, but he hadn't ought to have took no chair for granted when Pete was round. Milton Brett—

him that got sent over the road for rustling beef last July — Milt did paste Pete on the jaw one time after his pipe blew up and singed off his mustache and eyebrows; but Pete didn't stop laughing even — just picked Milt up and spanked him. Milt went for his gun after that; but, somehow or other, he had mislaid it and he wouldn't use none that the boys willingly offered him. He said he was wonted to his own and knew he could rely on it, but he wasn't taking no chances of botching up no assassination with an unfamiliar weapon. That was the sort of luck Pete had until he met up with Jessie Tarrant.

"That Blueblanket dance was more than common doings. It was the first city hall Blueblanket had ever had in the six months that it had been a city, and the whole teeming hundred and twenty-eight of its population was busting with pride and bound to make the celebration a success. The Board of Trade chartered a private buckboard and drove round to deliver the invites personally, and the Flying V was one of the first places they stopped. At the head of Calico Cañon they made a longer stop at Tarrant's, and Miss Jessie said she'd sure attend if she could only get a gentleman to take her. Tarrant allowed that, the way gentlemen had been beating trails to his humble home from forty mile round and wearing out rocking-chair seats and welcomes and things on no particular business, the chances was she could rope in one, or even more if more was needed; and he wasn't crowding the truth when he said it.

"There was three gentlemen at the Flying V Ranch that put in applications to take Miss Jessie to that dance, and two of the horses out of the three that they rode over to

apply was never the same animals after that. The gentleman that got there first was Frank Ellis, and Frank was a boy who would always look ahead a little if there was any chance of saving trouble; so when he found he was the prize winner he went right to Pete and took him off a piece outside the bunk house.

"'Was you aiming to go to the dance, Pete?' he asks.

"'Sure!' says Pete, prompt and cheerful. 'Them's my intentions. Blueblanket has always treated me right and I wouldn't want to disappoint the folks and spoil the whole shindig by not going. Why, certainly! I'll be on hand, like a sore thumb. We've got to make that dance a big success.'

"'That's my idea,' says Frank. 'What will you take to stay away?'

"'Spread your idea a little so's I can study it easy,' says Pete.

"'Here it is,' says Frank: 'We want to make that dance a success as a dance. We don't want no side-splitting extrys in the way of entertainment like you've furnished in times past and gone of yore. Plain dancing is good enough for us and the ladies what we expect to take along. We ain't anxious to have anything happen to the lights, and if the piano ain't just what it ought to be we don't care to have it operated on with wire cutters. I thought I'd laugh myself sick when you greased Mat Bingham's fiddlestick at Perry Winter's hoedown that night; but I happen to know that there was others besides Mat who couldn't quite see where the laugh come in.

"'It takes all kinds of cur'ous people to make a world, and the bulk of 'em — women folks especially — want to

dance to sweet melodious sounds when they've got all fixed up and their bangs curled for it. You sabe that, don't you, Pete? They figure they can snicker all they want in their old clothes 'most any place and any time, and put baby frogs down their own necks, where they can get 'em out again without embarrassing theirselves in public. I know your intentions is good and only to promote mirth and merriment, but there ain't no denying that you run it plumb into the ground at times; so I allowed it might be as well for you to stay right here and play a few games of solitaire, or braid a quirt or something, instead of going to Blueblanket and raising hilarious hell where it ain't called for. I'd be willing to trade you the little roan if you could see it that way, and take it as a favor. I'd sure take it as a favor, Pete.'

"Pete laughed and slapped his leg.

"'That frog sure was a joke on Birdie, wasn't it?' he says. 'She like to throwed a fit. Haw, haw, haw!' Then he looked hard at Frank. 'What makes you so dad-blamed anxious about this?' he asks.

"'I'm a-going to take Miss Jessie Tarrant to that dance,' says Frank; 'and when I take a lady any place I want things to go smooth.'

"'I've heard about her a heap,' says Pete. 'I'd like right well to see her. If she's going I guess I'll have to go, just out of curiosity. Can I go if I promise not to take along no frogs, Frank?'

"'I guess you'll go, anyway, dog-gone you!' says Frank, sort of disgusted.

"'And if I don't monkey with the lights or the music?'

"'It ain't no use trying to reason with you; I can see that,' says Frank. 'But if you break up that dance in any

way, shape or manner I'll sure play even with you sooner or later, and most likely so soon it will make your head swim. If there's any parlor-match heads throwed on to the floor ——'

"Pete slapped his leg again and laughed until he had to hang on to Frank's neck to hold himself up.

"'There won't be no-ho-ho-ho-no match heads,' he gurgles. 'Not a wa-ha-ha-ha-hum! No, sir; I wouldn't throw-ho-ho-ho match heads.'

"Frank shook him off and left him weaving round and wiping his eyes with the corner of his neckerchief; and a couple of nights later the boys saddled up and rode over to the dance.

"I won't say no more about that dance further than that it was the toniest function there had been in the Territory up to date. It was a dance with dog; a dance dee-lucks; a dance that laid over anything I ever seen before or since. Every foot-loose cow-puncher, and every giddy granger from eighteen to sixty-eight between White River and Hay Creek, was there, seemed like to me. There was miners from Terry and Ruby Basin; there was bull-whackers from Custer; there was old sourdoughs from the Rapid Valley and tinhorns from Crook, and girls, and ladies who had got a little a-past it, from everywheres. You could smell hair oil and bay rum and white-rose perfume as far as you could see the blaze of lights and hear Lafe Holman calling quadrilles; and I never knew there was so much ribbon and so many colors of it in the wide, wide world.

"The chivalry of Blueblanket had been shaving candles on the floor and shuffling it in since early morning, and it

looked like no living thing could stand upright on it without calks on their shoes. There was a first and a second fiddle, a horn and a parlor organ, and somebody said something about a large reperto're; but I guess the fellow that played that must have bogged down somewhere. Anyway, there was music enough to go round without him.

"It looked like Pete Wallaby was a-going to behave himself. 'Most generally the boys had trouble starting for a dance, owing to razors getting misplaced and flour put in their hats, and the linings of their coat sleeves sewed up, and such; but this time the whole outfit got off without a hitch or a word spoke out of the way. Frank Ellis started about half a day earlier than the rest to make sure of getting to Calico Cañon on time, and Pete helped him wash the buggy and slick up the team that Shorty Williams had let him take.

"'All I ask is a knockdown to this Miss Jessie Tarrant,' says Pete. 'I've heared tell a heap about that lady, and from what I hear I've got an idea that her and me is a-going to cotton to each other a heap considerable. You tell her I said so. Make her feel good. You'll want something pleasant and interesting to talk about; so you just tell her about me and say that, as far as I know, her chances is good.'

"'The kindest thing will be not to say nothing about you,' says Frank. 'I'm one of the sort that if I can't say nothing good about a man I keep my mouth shut.'

"Pete laughed. He was mighty good-natured, Pete was; that was one thing about him. Always meant well. Liked his little joke; but, only for being a pest and a nuisance, there wasn't no real harm in him. I don't know whether

he meant anything more than to plague Frank about Jessie Tarrant, because he had never paid much attention to the girls — only to torment them. He took in the dances once in a while, but he wasn't crazy about it, and he was as apt to go in his chaps and no more fixing up than washing his face and giving his hair a lick of the comb as any other way. This time, though, he was as slick and shining and sweet-smelling as e'er a one in the crowd, and his good clothes didn't disfigure him anything like what you'd naturally expect.

"Even good clothes can't hide a straight back and square shoulders, and a set of white teeth that not even lifting nail kegs and tables up by them had pulled out of line. Jessie Tarrant took notice of them teeth of Pete's right after she had posted herself on his eyes, and she showed him a set that was just as white and even, only smaller and with more attractive surroundings.

"'I've heared a heap about you, Mr. Wallaby,' she says, and then laughed one of them easy laughs of hers.

"'I'll break Frank Ellis' fool neck for him,' says Pete.

"'It wasn't Frank Ellis told me about you; it was a young lady,' says Jessie. 'She thinks a whole lot of you.'

"'That's good,' says Pete.

"'I didn't say it was,' says Jessie. 'I wouldn't call it that, exactly.'

"'Who was it, anyway?' Peter asks her.

"'It was Birdie McPheeters,' Jessie told him. 'Would you like to know what she thinks of you? I guess she told you though. She says she did.'

"'She sure did!' says Pete, braying a few notes. 'She

certainly told me a-plenty. I reckon she didn't hold nothing out on me. Ho-ho-ho! Ho-ho-ho-ho!'

"'You ought to go outside to do that,' says Jessie, sort of reproachful. 'No; don't,' she says. 'You might scare some of the teams.'

"'I wasn't going to,' says Pete—'not so long as you are in here. May I have the honor of having the pleasure of the next dance with you, if you please, ma'am?'

"'I'm sorry to have to regret to say that you can't,' she says; 'but if you're not engaged by being tied up and bespoke for the varsovienne, and you are wishfully desirous of wanting to dance that with me, I'll try to remember not to forget you if you come round and remind me.'

"'I'm thankfully grateful for the opportunity of the chance; and I'm much obliged to you, to boot,' says Pete.

"And when the varsovienne was called they took the floor; and I want to tell you that it was a pretty sight. Pete could ride a horse and he could dance. When you saw him do either one of them two things you'd say he never done nothing else in his worthless life; Jessie was as light as thistledown and yet her little feet would hit the floor as sharp and true as you could draw a stick along a picket fence; and, right foot and left foot and swing and turn, the two moved like they was parts of the same machinery and didn't have to think about it no more than machinery would. Not having to think, they naturally talked.

"'How do you ever study out all them comical things you do?' says Jessie, looking up at him, admiring. 'Like frogs down girls' backs, and such?'

"'Oh, I don't know,' says Pete. 'It's a gift, I reckon. I don't have to study on 'em; they just come to me.'

"'Ain't there no way of heading them off?' says Jessie.

"'I never studied on that,' says Pete. 'You don't think I've got frogs in my pocket now, do you? If I had you wouldn't need to be a-skeered. I might clip off one of them cunning little curls when you wasn't looking, but that's as far as I'd go with you.'

"'If you went that far you'd sure wish that you hadn't never started!' says Jessie.

"'I ain't got no shears with me,' says Pete.

"'All you've got with you is your nerve,' says Jessie. 'Ain't that horn heavenly? I think the gentleman that's playing it is real good-looking too. Don't you? I love blue eyes, and his is the bluest I ever seen. I think it's a shame to keep him up there playing all evening.'

"'It is a kind of a shame,' Pete agrees. 'Somebody ought to yank him down by the leg.'

"'Frank Ellis has got blue eyes too,' she says.

"'He might get 'em blacked sometime,' says Pete. 'Frank talks real sassy once in a while. He's all right though; and if he keeps away from my girl him and me will be good friends. I'm going to mention it to him.'

"'Maybe I can help you to keep him away from her,' says Jessie.

"'I wouldn't be surprised if you could,' says Pete, grinning. 'That horn is sure h-h-heavenly, like you said.'

"The horn and the rest of the music stopped just then and Pete had to take his lady to her seat. Then he strolled round to the platform where the music was and took a good look at the fellow that played the horn.

"He was a young Swede, name of Erickson, that played one winter in the Gem Orchestra at Deadwood — a long-

legged, bushy-headed boy, almost an inch taller than Pete was himself, with a little brimstone-colored mustache. He seen Pete was looking at him and he looked back, straight and sober. "'What kind of wind gets the best results from that contraption of yours, pardner?' Pete asks. 'East wind or Chinook, or what? Excuse me for asking.'

"'You haf a-planty gude excoose,' says Erickson. 'Ay can tall right away that your mindt is weak.'

"Before Pete could come back at him Lafe Holman yelled 'Pardners for a quadrille!' and the music started up again. Pete danced that with Vannie Streeter and then hustled round to ask Jessie for the next waltz; but all she gave him was a kind word and a sweet smile, and when Frank Ellis come up she took Frank's arm and walked away with him.

"'Well, I reckon I might as well attend to your little matter right now, Mr. Ellis,' says Pete, looking after them; and with that he slipped out of the hall and was gone for about fifteen or twenty minutes.

"When he come back he was grinning all over his face; but the grin faded out when he seen Jessie and Birdie McPheeters standing with their arms round each other's waists and a-talking to the Swede horn virtuoso. Erickson seemed to be enjoying the conversation, too.

"'Hm-m-m!' says Pete. 'I come mighty near forgetting about you. Telling you how heavenly you play, ain't they?'

"He turned and went out of the hall again and this time he wasn't gone so long. They had just started another waltz and Erickson was doing the most part himself, the two fiddles just chipping in in spots; and I want to tell you that that fellow was blowing the most soulful and melting

and dreamy of anything you ever heard, for a horn. You could hear folks all over the room remarking how sweet and lovely it was, and the boys and girls was just a-rolling up their eyes as they danced. He was sure reeling it off in great shape.

"Pete tiptoed along by the wall until he got to where there was some seats close up to the platform where Erickson was performing, and when he seen that the Swede had took notice of him he sat down and pulled a big lemon out of his pocket.

"The Swede's blue eyes looked mighty frosty at that, but he turned them away to the other side of the hall as Pete got out his knife and cut the lemon in half. Pete smiled and licked one of the halves kind of relishing and wry-mouthed, and kept on a-licking it. He knew Erickson knew what he was a-doing and that he couldn't help looking at him again to save his Swede neck; and it wasn't but a moment or two before Erickson's Adam's apple jumped and the horn missed one note and played the next away off. Then Erickson looked, and there was sure murder and sudden death in his eyes. Pete grinned at him real aggravating and set his teeth right down into that lemon, and then puckered his mouth. The Swede looked away as quick as he could, but his Adam's apple worked up and down again and the horn broke gait and bubbled.

"I was standing close by and taking it all in, and I'll be switched if my own mouth didn't dribble like a baby's, the way Pete was going for that fruit; and I had been suffering the other way just before that. Then the fiddles come in and gave Erickson a chance to shake his horn out. You could see he was bullheaded enough to think he could finish

up the waltz; but he hadn't much more than put the mouthpiece to his lips before he had to swallow, and the horn began to bubble and whiffle worse than ever. Then he catched Pete's eye again, and I'm bound to say that I wasn't much surprised at what happened.

"He didn't whoop, that Swede didn't. It was something between a roar and a bellow that he let out. His eyes blazed, and he drew back his long arm and sent that horn whizzing a-past Pete's head like it had been shot out of a cannon. If Pete hadn't dodged as quick as he did that instrument would sure have been crumpled so bad that it couldn't never have been straightened out again. As it was, it took old Fred Higginson, the shift boss at the Alcantara, in a soft place in the center of his anatomy; so it wasn't scarcely bent, outside of its natural curlicues. Fred was some twisted though, and his side pardner, Bill Treadway, had to act for him — which he done. He couldn't get no direct action on the Swede, because Erickson had followed his horn off the platform in the same direction, and Pete had met him before his feet touched the ground. All Bill could do was slam Guy Hepburn, the second fiddler, who was trying to pull Pete off the Swede; and Dave Hughes, the Blueblanket blacksmith, crowded right in and landed with the best he had just behind Bill's ear.

"The scene that followed was one of indescribable confusion, as the fellow says, and I reckon it would have lasted longer than it did if one of the lamps hadn't got turned over, and the party-cipants, which included a majority of the able-bodied males present, hadn't had to forget their personal differences to put out the blaze. Seemed like it was one of them incidents that sort of spoil 'most any social

occasion and take the tuck out of it; but they couldn't have gone on with the dance and let joy be unconfined nohow, account of the orchestra being mostly débris and cases that required care and nursing. Gene Lewis did find that the organ could still be used some, but nearly all the girls was on the way home; so what was the use?

"Jessie Tarrant stood out by Sol Epstein's hitching rack and watched Frank Ellis change back the front and hind wheels of the buggy to where they belonged. There was a considerable axle grease on the hubs and spokes of them wheels when Frank started the job, and when he finished the most of it was on his hands and clothes. All the same, Frank remembered that he was a gentleman. Jessie told him not to mind her and to say whatever he felt like; but Frank wouldn't.

"'If I got started once I wouldn't be apt to stop this side of what no lady ought to listen to,' says Frank. 'Ain't the stars bright?'

"'It was that Pete Wallaby, wasn't it?' Jessie asks, sort of deadly quiet.

"'I shouldn't be surprised if Mr. Wallaby wasn't more or less directly or indirectly responsible,' says Frank in about the same way.

"'And it was him broke up the dance? I saw him real busy; but he started the trouble, didn't he?'

"'I'll take an early opportunity of asking him about it and let you know,' says Frank.

"He looked at her as they struck the cañon trail, and her lips was set so tight that you could hardly see the red. Her cheeks was red enough though — a bright patch of scarlet on each one and the rest of her face pale. It was one of the

times when her eyes was snapping instead of twinkling, but she spoke as quiet as she did before, the words coming slow and distinct, like drops off an icicle.

"'Listen!' she says. 'I'm going to get even with Mr. Peter Wallaby for this.'

"When Frank Ellis got back from Calico Cañon the Flying V bunk house was about as still as a bunk house ever gets to be round about three o'clock A. M. Frank carried his lantern in and held it for as long as a couple of minutes over Pete Wallaby, studying whether he would wake him up, or kill him while he was asleep, or wait until the boys got up at daylight. Pete was sleeping like a baby with a blameless past. He had washed his face before retiring and you couldn't scarcely notice that he was marked up, except his knuckles, which was exposed just outside of the blanket.

"Finally Frank concluded that he wanted Pete to know what happened to him, and that he'd feel fresher and make a better showing if he sawed off a little slumber himself; so he peeled off his garments and turned in.

"That was where he made his mistake. It's a good idea to sleep on some things; but if you've made up your mind to lick a man the time to do it is while you've got him in easy reach and the bristles is still raised on your neck. Frank was last man in to breakfast the next morning and Pete was already through and using his mouth to talk while he rolled him a cigaret.

"'It just goes to show how man may do his darndest to dodge trouble and yet have it piled on him two-foot thick,' says Pete. 'Here I goes to this dance and act like a

perfect lady right along — no cutting up or nothing, and you'd think, to hear them Blueblanket folks talk, that I'd been helling round from the minute I struck town. I own up that I did have a dandy scheme for a little fun and excitement, but I changed my notion. Frank Ellis told me he wanted things to run smooth and there ain't nothing I wouldn't do to please Frank. I think more of that boy than I do of some of my own blood kin.

"'Why, hello, Frank! I didn't see you come in. Well, nobody can't say that I didn't do my darndest to make things run smooth — as smooth as grease — axle grease; and here I'm sitting, peaceable and quiet, listening to the music and taking a little light refreshment, and a crazy Swede ups and tries to brain me with a brass horn without aye, yes or no, hog, dog or devil, or rhyme or reason — and me sitting, like I said, as ca'm and peaceful as moonlight on the lake or a bump on a log, or anything you like to mention. That's what I get!'

"'That ain't all you get,' says Frank, lifting his cup.

"'Excuse me interrupting you, gentlemen,' says Shorty Williams, looking in at the door. 'Pete, if you've et enough to last you till noon I'd like to have you saddle up and bring in them horses from Little Powder Creek. Jim, you might go with him and help him, if you'd just as soon. I see you're through.'

"He waited until Pete and Jim got up and then trailed off with them to the corral to see that they got an early start. Frank had set down his coffee cup. The coffee was too hot to drink and he had figured that it was a poor time to throw it. Before he had finished his breakfast Shorty come back and told him he was elected to drive a bunch of

beef steers to the railroad, and that was a matter of three or five days, according to whether the cars was on the side track as per solemn oath and agreement of the U. P. agent — which, of course, they wasn't. While the boys was waiting for the cars Frank met up with a beauteous little biscuit shooter, who took a real personal interest in his nourishment and had a little time to spare evenings after supper.

"The result was that Frank got back with a tintype photograph in his left inside vest pocket and more charitable feelings under that. He hadn't quite give up the idea of making Pete feel sorry that he was ever born. He'd passed his word to play even sooner or later and he calculated to keep his word good; but he allowed that later would be time a-plenty — after he got his homestead and preëmption picked out and a good log house built on it, anyway. Pete wasn't at the ranch when he got back; he'd got Shorty to let him have a day off and had rode over to Calico Cañon to get acquainted with Old Man Tarrant and Mrs. Tarrant and the dog.

"Jessie happened to be about, as she often was, account of living there, and you never seen nobody pleasanter than what she was.

"'Ain't this a surprise! Why, Mr. Wallaby! I ain't seen you since the dance, have I?'

"'Don't you never think I was willing to let all that time go by without coming to see you,' says Pete. 'I've been just as anxious to see you as you have to see me.'

"'As much as that?' she asks, showing a dimple.

"'Maybe more,' says Pete. 'It wouldn't surprise me. You may think I'm lying; but, honest to goodness and cross

my heart, that's so. When I take a notion that I like a person I just naturally want to camp with 'em. I'm uneasy when I can't see 'em — plumb uneasy and unhappy. I'm funny that way.'

"'You're funny lots of ways,' says Jessie. 'That was a real cute thing you done to Mr. Erickson at the dance.'

"'Erickson?' says Peter. 'Oh, sure! He's the gentleman that played the horn so heavenly, ain't he? Well, Miss Jessie, ma'am, I don't believe that Mr. Erickson could blow out a match at the present moment.'

"'And setting the city hall afire!' says Jessie. 'That certainly was a good joke on Blueblanket. They put the fire out first, didn't they?'

"'First — how?' Pete asks.

"'Before they put you out.'

"'I didn't hear nothing about that part of it,' says Pete. 'I think if that had happened some of the boys would have told me about it. I hope you don't think I started that fire. It was a gentleman of the name of McCarty.'

"'You threw him at the lamp, though, didn't you?' says Jessie.

"'No, ma'am!' says Pete. 'That was an accident. I aimed at the window.'

"'My!' says Jessie. 'Here I am a-setting here, and you must be thirsty after that long ride. I'm going to make you some nice cold lemonade. I guess we've got lemons in the house.'

"'That's going to take precious time,' says Pete. 'I'd rather perish with thirst, if it's just the same to you — unless you let me go with you and watch you make it.'

"Jessie told him she couldn't think of such a thing and

that she wouldn't be gone much more than a minute or two. She wasn't either. In a few minutes she came back with a pitcher of nice cool lemonade and poured him out a glass of it. Pete took a sip and kind of smacked his lips.

"'That's elegant,' he says, and drunk down the rest of it.

"'Have some more,' says Jessie, giggling.

"'I'll just go you!' says Pete.

"He didn't sip that time, but just tilted the glass and took it in a breath. Jessie looked at him kind of curious as he gave her a grateful smile.

"'I don't like to act like a hog, but I wonder if there ain't maybe a little left in that pitcher,' he says, holding out his glass again. 'But maybe you'd like some yourself. I'm mighty selfish, ain't I? You take what's left — or we'll share it.'

"'I wouldn't choose any, thank you,' says Jessie. She took up the pitcher and poured the rest of the lemonade over the rail of the porch. 'I'll make you some more,' she says, 'if you're sure you want it.'

"Pete bent over to look where she'd poured.

"'Ain't you afraid you'll kill them posies?' he asks. 'They say salt ain't good for flowers.'

"'I guess it takes the freshness out of them,' says Jessie. 'Shall I make you some more?'

"'It keeps things, of course,' says Pete. 'But you don't need to worry about keeping me. You can't lose me. You can't even mislay me, Jessie.'

"He looked at her pretty straight, smiling, but kind of serious too. For once in her life Jessie didn't know what to say for as much as five seconds. Then she said:

"'Ain't you a little mite familiar on short acquaintance, Mr. Wallaby?'

"'Why — bless your sweet, pretty little heart! — ours ain't a short acquaintance,' says Pete. 'It's just a beginning, of course, but it's going to last as long as we both live.'

"'If that's so I don't believe I want to live long,' says Jessie. 'Oh, ma! I want you to come here and meet Mr. Wallaby. Mr. Wallaby's the gentleman who changed the buggy wheels round on Frank Ellis and me the night of the dance.'

"I know lots of men who would have been plumb discouraged by a start like that, but Pete Wallaby didn't have enough sense to let it faze him. From that time on he was a regular and occasional caller at the Calico Cañon Ranch, and he acted like he knew he was more than welcome. He made himself solid with Tarrant by breaking in some colts the old man had in good shape and by turning his hand to any little jobs that seemed to be crowding when he was there. He got a stand-in with the old lady by ways and means that generally works if a man ain't too busy with daughter to use 'em right along. He made friends with the dog and he didn't overlook the cat, and it seemed like Jessie was the only one that didn't appear to want him round — and there was times when she acted more like he was one of the other boys that wore out them forty-mile trails to the ranch.

"Them trails soon begun to get dim and grown over with grass and weeds — all except the one from the Flying V. One by one the boys got less regular and more occasional,

and then less occasional and only once in a devil of a while. Nothing real awful ever happened to 'em, but Pete had a way of slapping them on the back, to show his friendliness, that was too plumb vigorous to suit 'em; and some of the jokes he played on them wasn't taken as good-natured as a joke ought to be took — not nearly so good-natured as he took the jokes that Jessie played on him right along.

"She wasn't no more than a little copy-cat — using all the old stand-bys, beginning with the salt in the lemonade; but I reckon she done her best for a beginner. She pulled his chair away as he was a-going to set down; she gave him a cigaret that she had rolled herself, with a pinch of powder in the tobacco; she blacked the sweatband inside his hat with soot off the stove lid mixed with lard; and she locked him in the barn for a whole afternoon when he went to put his horse in. Tarrant was out with the wagon after pitch-pine and her mother was in the kitchen that afternoon, so nobody seen her.

"The aggravating thing was that none of them things she done to him panned out the way she had figured. When she pulled the chair away Pete didn't hardly more'n crook his knees and throw himself a little forward to keep his balance. I reckon that by busting broncos which is apt to make sudden and unexpected moves, and doing it as a steady job, a man gets a little extry spry and hard to surprise. Anyway, Pete didn't jar the floor none whatever, and when he straightened up he apologized to Miss Jessie right humble for having his chair in her gangway. When he lit her loaded cigaret, what with the way she had rolled it and the way he held it, he didn't so much as singe a hair of his mustache, and the blister on his thumb didn't raise

until later on. She never seen it and he didn't mention it. All he done was grin at her like he'd grinned at Erickson.

"'That's good tobacco, Miss Jessie,' he says; 'free-burning as any I ever smoked. You ain't got a little more that you could spare, have you, please, ma'am?'

"'I don't believe you like it as well as you let on,' says Jessie, a considerable disappointed.

"'Not for smoking, maybe,' says Pete; 'but I could use it for blasting stumps on our claim. I didn't tell you about that claim of ours on Lower Horsehead, did I? I'm plumb forgetful! Why, yes; I aim to take you out there pretty soon to see how you are going to like it; but I want to do a little fixing up first. Them stumps is right where you'll want to have your posies.'

"'I guess you're mistaken,' she says. 'They won't be no more in the way of any posies I raise than if they was on the moon.'

"'Maybe that's so,' says Pete. 'If we build the house to the south of the stumps, so's they'll get the shade, you might grow ferns round 'em; but I'll leave it until you see. There ain't no rush.'

"Jessie said she hoped there wasn't and allowed that she heard her ma calling her.

"Similar, when she fixed his hat. He put it on, but he seemed to sense there was something wrong and took it off again and looked inside and run his finger round in it.

"'I reckon I must have got some black on my forehead,' he says. 'If you'll excuse me I'll go round to the wash-bench and get it off.' Which he done.

"And when she locked him up in the barn he stayed so quiet that she got curious along about sundown, and just

before Tarrant got back with his wood she went out and found Mr. Wallaby curled up, fast asleep in the haymow. She tiptoed back to the house and after a while Pete come in and apologized to her.

"'I didn't aim to take more'n about fifty winks at the outside after I put the little horse up,' he says, 'but I certainly overslept. I sure wasn't polite to come out to visit folks and then sneak out to the barn and go to sleep without even saying howdy. I hope you'll kindly excuse me.'

"'I don't know as you was so much to blame,' says Jessie, trying to keep a straight face. 'Considering that there was a three-inch iron bar and a padlock in the way of your getting out, I ain't real offended — specially as I snapped the padlock on you myself.'

"Pete looked at her and then busted out into one of his laughs.

"'Oh me, oh my!' he says, wiping his eyes. 'Do you reckon I was too blind to see you a-coming, and too deef to hear you wrastling with the bar, and too crippled to drop six foot down to the ground out of the haymow door? Oh, gal! Ho-ho-ho-ho!'

"'Stop that noise!' says Jessie, holding her fingers to her ears. 'If it was so easy to get out, why did you stay in?'

"'Because I allowed you wanted me to stay in, of course,' says Pete. 'Your wishes is my law and gospel. Yes, ma'am! And, besides, I needed that sleep. It certainly done me a heap of good.'

"That made Jessie so mad she couldn't see straight, and she would scarcely speak to him for nearly a week after —

not more than she had to. It certainly looked like to her that she wasn't getting even with Mr. Wallaby the way she figured the night of the Blueblanket dance, and she hadn't begun to break him of his smart-Aleck ways. Setting apart the getting even, she wasn't sure but if he could be broke of 'em he wouldn't be so dog-gone revolting, and some fool girl or another might take a notion to him and do worse than slap her brand on him. She wasn't sure but what his coming round all the time and making a nuisance of himself wasn't just because he knew how she just naturally despised him and wanted to plague her. She wasn't sure. That was the trouble — she wasn't sure; and no girl likes to feel thataway. It makes 'em uneasy and restless.

"But, so far as Pete's motives was concerned, he settled her mind as to that about the time she'd got over her mad. One morning he come up to the house riding his own slabsided, wicked-eyed buckskin and leading a bright bay with one white stocking, the prettiest-shaped and sweetest-gaited little horse you ever seen, and slicked up so he just flashed in the sun. Jessie was out in the yard feeding her chickens, and when she seen that picture along she dropped her pan and come a-running.

"'Oh, you beauty!' she says. 'You beauty! Where did you get him, Mr. Wallaby?'

"'That plug?' says Pete. 'Why, I just kind of run acrost him a month or two ago. I think I traded a can of tomatoes for him; but I allowed that if I had luck I might get something I wanted worse than tomatoes.'

"Jessie had her arm round the bay's neck by that time, and was laying her cheek against him and loving him and talking to him in a way that was mighty aggravating and

tantalizing and provoking to a human male who had to sit and watch it. The bay took it all like a lamb and nuzzled her right back.

"'You see how little sperit he's got,' says Pete. 'Old Buck, here, would bite a four-pound mouthful out of anybody who tried to take them kind of liberties with him. I wouldn't wonder but the tame-souled little son-of-a-gun would let you ride him. Yes, sir, ma'am; I believe he's that meek and undignified.'

"Jessie looked at him and let her eyes talk when he said that.

"'Well, I reckon I'll have to be moving on,' says Pete. 'I just stopped on my way. I don't know but what I might get asked to light and rest myself a spell. I couldn't have stayed though. I've got to find somebody to take him off my hands. I kind of hate to shoot him.'

"'Do you sure enough want to trade him off — or sell him?' says Jessie, her breath coming quick. 'If you do and if you don't open your mouth too wide on the price I might make a deal with you myself.' She tried to say it careless and easy, but she was too excited to make it sound thataway. Pete only laughed and shook his head, and jerked gentle but firm on the bay's hackamore.

"'I guess I'll be moving,' he says. 'So long!'

"Jessie stepped back as he started, and her eyes snapped and then filled with tears. Pete put old Buckskin into a lope like he had to get somewheres in a hurry, but he hadn't gone a dozen jumps before he wheeled sharp round and trotted up to the barn, chuckling to himself, and slipped off and opened the door.

"'Go get your riding skirt on while I saddle up for you,'

he called over his shoulder. 'I'll bet you the horse against a choke-cherry pie that I beat you.'

"Pete Wallaby was one of the swiftest men I ever see a-working round a horse, but he hadn't quite finished buckling the cinch of Jessie's sidesaddle when she come a-running out all fixed up for a ride and with the quirt that Pete had braided for her dangling at her wrist.

"'You win and I lose a can of tomatoes,' says Pete, grinning at her.

"She laughed like a tickled kid.

"'I could have killed you!' she said. 'You torment!'

"Pete stooped and held out his hand, and she put her little foot in it and went up into the saddle like a bird on to a twig. The next moment she was outside the bars and streaking it over the flat, squealing with joy, and the bay running like a scared wolf.

"Pete didn't lose no time following her, and there wasn't anything in the country that his ornery buckskin couldn't cover with dust and disgrace; but for the first mile he held back just for the pleasure of watching that girl and the bay; and they was both worth the watching, let me tell you. Every once in a while Jessie turned in her saddle and waved her hand at him, and Pete swung his quirt right and left as if he was pounding old Buck along the best he knew; but finally he slacked on the bridle and rode up alongside.

"'How do you like him?' he asked her.

"'I didn't know there was horses like him!' says Jessie, her face just alight. 'He's like a rocking-chair on wings and springs, and a mouth like velvet.' She pulled in a little. 'And see him single-foot! And how easy he checks up! Let's go again.'

"They went, and they kept on a-going. It was one of them bright September mornings with just a tang of cool in the air, when a long breath is almost as good as a drink. And them two took several long breaths, so that the most of the ride they was laughing at nothing at all and carrying on like a couple of fools. And after a while they got to the high broken ground above Benton's, where you can see all creation and quite a ways over the edge; and they sat down there, with their backs against a warm rock, and et a light lunch of chocolate creams from a fancy box all tied up with ribbons that Pete had brought along rolled in his slicker, while the horses, with their bridles dragging, cropped at the short grass.

"'My! I've just naturally got to have that horse,' says Jessie.

"'He's yours, ain't he?' says Pete. 'Didn't you win him on a bet?'

"'Don't be foolish!' she says. 'You don't suppose I'd take you up on a thing like that, do you? Well, I guess not!'

"'I was afraid you was a-going to,' says Pete. 'That's certainly a load offen my mind, because, to tell you the truth, I bought that horse and broke him and trained him for a present to my wife.'

"Jessie looked straight out at the scenery for quite a spell. After a while she says:

"'I didn't know — that you had a wife.'

"Pete kicked a rock loose with the heel of his boot and bent over to pick it up and toss it over the bluff.

"'Didn't you?' he says. Then he pointed over to where Horsehead lay like a curly string of tinsel off a Christmas

tree. 'Over there in a line with that dead cedar is where I picked out that claim.' He turned on his elbow to look at her. 'Why, as to that, I ain't got no wife yet. I just got nothing but hopes; but —— Geegosh!'

"He made a quick move and got his arms round her; and the next minute she was sobbing on his shirt bosom like her little heart would break. Pete couldn't do much more than pat her and soothe her; but she lifted her face at last and he got his chance. Jessie took it pretty well for a while; and then she broke away with a jerk, using his ears for leverage.

"'That's one more thing I'm going to get even with you for!' she says, blazing out at him.

"'You're going to marry me, ain't you, honey?' says Pete.

"'I — I've certainly got to have that horse,' she says. 'If you'll wait till the first of next April, why, then ——"

"I thought I heard wheels," said the old bullwhacker. "Pass Creek must be running bankful or the stage would have been here by this time," he observed. "And that lad in the bunk couldn't have had no sleep for a week."

"Well, did Jessie play even?" inquired the stock tender; whereat the Hat Creek granger gloomily remarked that if she married him she did. "Tip's married, so he ought to know," continued the stock tender. "But did she break him of his joking, Sam?"

"I told you that all you jokers gets broke sooner or later," replied the old bullwhacker. "Yes, she married him, and they went to live on the Horsehead claim. For a right smart of a while it was give and take with them

and Pete had to do most of the taking. One time she soaked the heads of all the matches that he had in his vest pocket and he like to died for a smoke before he got back; another time she put mustard in his boots and he had to quit breaking sod and sit in the kitchen with his feet up on a chair for a day or two and watch her fill the wood box and carry in the water, which he told her was worse pain than his feet.

"Frank's claim was only six or seven miles from them, and him and Frank and the womenfolks neighbored a considerable. But, for all Jessie done to show him the error of his ways, Pete would break out in a new place with some monkey trick — until finally Jessie turned loose and told him just what she thought of him. It was right after Pete had tied the flowers off her best hat to some plants in the back yard that wasn't expected to bloom for a month or two. I'm bound to say that them flowers looked pretty too. Anyway, she opened up on Pete good and plenty.

"'You big grinning lummox!' she says, stamping her foot. 'I hate the sight of you! And what possessed me to marry you I can't think. I always did hate you. I wish I had died before I ever seen you!'

"Pete turned white.

"'You don't mean that, Jessie gal!' he says.

"'Don't I?' says Jessie. 'You bet I do, you fool! You fool! I hate you, and I'd like never to see your silly face again.'

"Pete didn't say nothing to that; he just went out to the barn and saddled up old Buck and rode off like the devil was after him. It had took him a heap by surprise what Jessie had said, though she'd been turrible cranky and ugly

with him for a month past or more, acting so unreasonable that he didn't hardly know what to make of it, and going off by herself to bawl a whole lot; whereas she'd always been just the opposite, and, even with the jokes, they'd had great times together in that little new house.

"Anyway, only the day before that, Shorty Williams had been after Pete to take a shipment of cattle for him to South Omaha, account of Harvey Lowe, who'd generally took them, being sick with a broken leg. Pete had begged off, but now he begun to think — when he got so's he could think — that a trip to Omaha would be like a providence.

"So he headed for the Flying V and found it wasn't too late to get the job. Before he left he sent word to Jessie by one of the boys to say where he'd gone if she wanted to write to him in care of the commission house; and he sent word to Frank Ellis to have him see that Jessie didn't need nothing, and to take her to Calico Cañon if she wanted to visit her folks.

"'I'll wait there until she sends for me too,' he says to himself.

"Whether it was the bullheaded streak in him and whether Jessie allowed that he'd come back without her sending for him, I don't know. What I do know is that Pete stayed in Omaha for the best part of two months, taking a job in the stockyards to pass the time. Frank Ellis said that he didn't look as if he had been enjoying himself when he got back — sort of like he'd been wrung out and drawed through a knothole, and his eyes like two burnt holes in a blanket. He stopped at Frank's place, but he would'nt get off his horse.

"'Is everything all right up at the house?' he asks, kind of croaking. 'Jessie's all right, ain't she?'

"'Why, yes,' says Frank. 'Ain't you seen her? The last I heard she was looking fine and feeling fine. Didn't you know she was at the cañon with her folks?'

"'I don't know nothing,' says Pete. 'I missed connections with my mail and I just got back. She's all right, is she?'

"Frank looked at him kind of curious.

"'I told you,' he says.

"'Well, what are you looking at me thataway for?' says Pete, glaring at him.

"'You ain't heard nothing?' says Frank. 'Nothing at all?'

"'I'll get down off this horse and squeeze it out of your throat if you'd rather,' says Pete, snarling.

"'Oh, well!' says Frank. 'I'll tell you this much then: You'd better get over to the cañon and look after things. Jessie seems to have took up with a young fellow — a stranger in these parts — that —— Well, there's been talk about it. He's a good-looking boy, and he's with your wife the most of the time lately. I guess ——'

"'You're a low-down liar!' says Pete, very slow and very earnest.

"He looked at Frank for a moment, but Frank didn't say nothing; only grinned sort of foolish.

"'The next time I see you I'll kill you as sure as God made little apples, unless you kill me first,' says Pete; and with that he turned and rode off.

"Frank hollered at him once or twice, but he didn't pay no attention. About a mile from Tarrants' he stopped

and took his gun from the scabbard and looked it over. Then he rode on to the house and knocked at the door. Mrs. Tarrant opened it and she didn't look tickled to death to see him.

"'Oh, you've come back, have you?' she says.

"'Yes, ma'am,' says Pete, quiet and sober. 'I've come back. Where's Jessie?'

"'She's in the setting room,' says the old lady; 'but I don't know as you'd better go a-busting in. She's got ——'

"'She's got company, I presume,' says Pete in the same slow, quiet way. 'That's what they tell me. I guess I'll see the company, too, please, ma'am, if you'll let me pass.'

"'I don't like the way you look, Peter, or the way you act,' says Mrs. Tarrant, still blocking the gangway. 'You —— There! You've woke him.'

"There was a sound come from the room beyond, a sound that there ain't nothing on earth like it except cats. A cat comes a-nigh it sometimes. It rose up full and strong, and Pete staggered back as he heard it. It was Jessie's company calling for nourishment or complaining of a pain.

"'My Lord!' he says. 'Great Geegosh! Is that it?'

"The next minute he let out a yell that would have woke up all the babies for a mile round.

"'Jessie! Oh, Jessie gal!' And he started for the setting room just as Jessie flung open the door and made a flying leap into his arms."

The stock tender swore *sotto voce*.

"You ought to know better than to whoop like that!" he told the old bullwhacker reproachfully.

The three listened and a slight noise came from the stage barn.

"I told you so!" said the stock tender. "And here's the stage a-coming through the Gap, too."

More noises from the barn; this time produced by the human voice — language unmistakably wrathful, loudly and shockingly profane, fluent and threatening.

"I thought you was making a mistake to leave that there shaving mirror of yours hanging where he could see it when he woke, Hank," remarked the old bullwhacker mildly. "I thought so at the time."

Spurs clanked on the barn floor; and, with a step indicating direct purpose and instant action and his painted visage diabolically contorted, the Z Bell boy emerged into the sunlight and made straight for the stock tender, who, after a second's hesitation, retreated to the shed where the change of horses for the stage was tied, harnessed for a rapid transfer.

To jerk a halter loose and leap to the back of one of the animals was, for the stock tender, the work of an instant; and he escaped from the shed just in time to evade the outraged Mr. Pollett, who promptly jumped on another of the horses and, lashing it to a gallop with the end of the halter rope, took up the chase.

"We're sure getting that break in the monotony of our dull lives," the old bullwhacker remarked, grinning happily as he and the Hat Creek granger watched the progress of the race. "Them horses is about an even match and I doubt if they stop this side of the Cheyenne."

He chuckled and then lifted up his voice in a shrill whoop of encouragement.

"I was a-going to say that Pete Wallaby never played another joke on anybody from that day to this," he resumed after an interested pause. "I reckon by the time Hank gets through with him, he'll be a leetle mite careful in future himself."

III

CONCERNING CAUTIOUS CLYDE

THEY were watching the stock tender of the Box Elder stage station as he nervously put the finishing touches to the midday meal — Jay Slyfield, the Hermosilla storekeeper, and Lon Selby, the lately elected young district attorney. These two had arrived in a buckboard an hour or two before with a sizable bag of sage hens, which they had slaughtered, not wantonly, but under the impression that they were prairie chickens. The old bullwhacker was present, almost as a matter of course, and almost equally of course "shooting off his fool mouth," as the stock tender expressed it.

Disregarding this rudeness the old bullwhacker continued to remark admiringly upon the stock tender's deft culinary motions. "It's a real pleasure to look at him," he murmured. "His arms ain't what you might call dimpled and his apron might be cleaner and his ankles trimmer, and I ain't excusing or palliating what he said when he took a-holt of that hot skillet handle, which wasn't ladylike; but all the same you can see that he's working; and industriousness and perspiration in others is beautiful to behold. And I've seen women that was worse cooks than Hank is when he's spreading himself for honored guests."

"But I don't see no pie," observed Slyfield in a stage undertone. "He must be sort of weak and futile on pie or

he'd have made a stagger at it. That's where a woman puts it all over these leathery old sour-doughs. If anything would make me marry it would be pie. Lemon-cream pie, custard pie, ros'b'ry pie, mince — light, flaky brown crusts and juicy innards! Ah-h-h-h!" Jay smacked his lips loudly.

"If anything would make you marry it would be finding a woman crazy enough to take you," the stock tender rejoined as he flopped the potatoes into a bowl. "But there ain't none such," he added, scraping out the flour gravy. "I ain't got no exalted opinion of the female mind, but it don't get that unhinged. Grub pile!"

For fifteen or twenty busy minutes there was no table talk beyond necessary requests, but at the prune stage of the repast, discussion of woman, marriage and cookery was resumed. Slyfield maintained that though bachelor existence had its inconveniences, connubial bliss was obviously a paradoxical phrase. In support of this contention he related several instances, modern and ancient, and appealed to the stock tender, who opined that marriage — carried to excess, at least — was to be classed among the bad habits. Witness their mutual friend, Lee McArthur, who had just been sent up by Judge Moody for his eighth indulgence, on complaint of his second and fifth.

Selby argued that this testimony was incompetent, immaterial and irrelevant, proving only criminal carelessness on the part of Mr. McArthur, and tending rather to support the theory of connubial bliss but for the divine discontent indicated by the same flitting from flower to flower, which made the first hypothesis absurd, illogical and improper; *exitus acta probat.*

"In other words," said Selby, "Mac was a hopeful cuss, who played against a long run of bad luck. Me, I'd marry in a holy minute if I could meet up with the right kind of a lady; but I'm a partcular man and I'd hate to be everlastingly chopping and changing from one wife to another. I'd want to make dead sure."

Upon this the old bullwhacker was seized with a convulsion that started at his diaphragm and worked upward in a series of seismic waves to his shoulders and found vent in a disappointingly brief chuckle or two, as a prelude to the following narrative:

You remind me of Clyde Britten. Clyde wanted to make dead sure. Clyde had ideas on the subject of marriage and he'd got his notion of what a girl would have to be to make him perfectly happy and contented like he had a right to expect to be. If there was anything Clyde prided himself on it was good hard horse sense and looking before he leaped. He'd stand on the brink of a chassum for days and weeks at a time, and longer if necessary, with his hand shading his straining eyes and his knees ready bent until the pale mists sort of cleared off and let him see the other side. Then maybe he'd leap, and maybe he wouldn't, but if he did he'd most always land with both feet. He'd landed general manager, head clerk and chief roustabout of the Blueblanket express office thataway, and looking ahead he couldn't see no obstructions but a few years' time to a good paying job in the Deadwood branch. He was only twenty-five years old then, and he could afford a little time. Yes, that was him. Same identical boy. Used to be at Blueblanket.

The only trouble with him then was that waiting all by himself he got kind of lonesome. What he needed was a congenial companion to take an undivided half interest in his welfare and the condition of his socks. This thing of bedding down on a cot in the office and boarding round places that wasn't no better than the last place got kind of old to Clyde. I gathered that from what he told me and from his actions. I reckon most boys get thataway if they ain't too busy helling round. The ticking of the little old tin clock ain't no good substitute for the music of a loved voice, and talking to yourself gets monotonous anyway. Even having a-plenty of reading matter round the shack don't help much, and the first thing you know you're planning out a program of this here connubial bliss.

It sure looks like a dead open-and-shut proposition as well as a real pious idea; blissful, all right, and at the same time a heap practical. About all there is lacking is a girl to fit into the scheme, and that part of it is easy as falling off a log. You can find a girl anywhere — some sort of a girl — and that's the kind you get. She ain't cross-eyed, nor pigeon-toed, nor hump-backed, nor over thirty at the outside, and gosh! how she loves you! It's sure touching the way she looks up to you and admires you after she's quit deviling and got down to cases. If you find later on that there's some little things about her that you don't exactly approve of — it ain't likely; but supposing there was — why she'd sure be glad to change to suit you. Sure!

Now Clyde wasn't that foolish. He hadn't not only read the papers but he'd run acrost one or two cases himself where young men had leaped into preachers' back parlors and justices' offices like these here bounding gazelles

you hear about, and, years after, had owned up that if they'd looked ahead a little first ropes couldn't have drug them, as long as there was something for them to grab and hang onto. They didn't make no bones of saying that they had been real disappointed in the ladies that they thought they had chosen. There was points of difference between what they figured them ladies was and what they turned out to be, and every dad-blamed point was sharp and barbed and poisoned with gall and bitterness. And all because they had took everything for granted in a way that would have covered them with hot shame if it had been a horse that they had acquired similarly heedless. But Clyde knew better.

"Me, I'd marry in a holy minute if I could meet up with the right kind of a lady," says Clyde to me one time when he'd got a confidential streak on him. "But I'm sort of particular," he says, "and I'd take at least a day or two off beforehand to investigate into the lady's accomplishments and disposition, and then I'd keep her under observation for a spell. If she come up to specifications in every respect it wouldn't take me long to decide whether I wanted her or not, and once I decide I sure make the lurid levin bolt hump to keep up with me in the matter of action."

"Son," says I, "you are wise beyond your years. If all young men was like you this here divorce evil would die for want of nourishment. I reckon the marriage evil would be some debilitated, too, specially if all the young women was to get equally cagy. But, be that as it may or may not or couldn't possibly, I'd like to know what them specifications of yours is. I travel quite a heap between this and

Sidney, and I might find you something like it on the way. What kind of a young lady would you want, son?"

He studied a while before he spoke, looking right profound for an apple-cheeked young slim-jim with a smear of brown mustache. "Well, Mr. Stegg," he says finally, "I'd want, the first thing, a girl with a cheerful and amiable nature. I don't mean right on the everlasting giggle and grin, but sweet and serene, so to speak."

"I'm glad to hear you talk thataway, Clyde," says I. "The most of you young bucks want her to be a daisy looker the first thing and the last thing, forgetting that beauty's charms decay, as the fellow says, and golden hair turns gray — if it's let to — while a sunshiny sperrit is a crown of rubies that never dieth and moths can't break in and rust. You've got a level head, boy. It's the peaches that makes all the trouble in this world."

"I don't say that having the general aspects of a mud fence would be any recommendation," says Clyde. "I'd want her to be good looking too. I reckon I couldn't be perfectly happy with a girl that wasn't restful to the eyes after a long all-day strain on waybills and tariff sheets. Beauty ain't no drawback if it goes with sense and intelligence, and Mrs. Clyde Britten would be sensible and intelligent. Not so much so that she'd be setting up her judgment against mine and starting arguments, but not empty-headed and foolish, like some I could name. I'd want her to be an educated and refined lady that could move in the best circles in Deadwood and do me credit and have domestic tastes and know how to make a good loaf of bread and put up preserves and all such and keep down expenses. If she had a little money of her own it wouldn't

hurt nothing, if it didn't make her too blame independent. She could fix it so that the children could get it if she wanted to. I wouldn't stick out for that though. A man can't get everything. It wouldn't be reasonable to expect it, and I ain't unreasonable, I hope."

"Considering what the girl would get, I think you're more than reasonable," I told him. "Here you are, handsome and high-spirited and well-conducted and brainy and polite and popular. You're drawing down sixty a month as regular as clockwork and you've got the ambition and business ability to bring it up to seventy-five or a hundred. I never seen you when your finger nails wasn't clean; you're a good dancer and an elegant performer on the guitar. I ain't saying this to flatter you; I'm just stating facts, and you can't deny 'em."

"No, I don't know as I can," says Clyde. "Putting aside all false modesty and such. I reckon that ain't no more than the truth. I don't go round blowing about it, but it's so."

And it was so. He wouldn't have said it himself, but he knew it and wasn't ashamed of it. Excepting here and there a crank or two, all Blueblanket liked Clyde. He had a smile and a pleasant word for everybody, even if he was a little short of change, and you could go into the express office and ask him all the fool questions you'd a mind to and he'd answer them as cheerful and accommodating as if he owned the business himself and was trying to make it go against stiff competition.

"But the poor girl died quite a few years ago, Clyde," I says.

"What girl?" says he. "What are you talking about?"

I didn't tell him, thinking he might figure it out for himself. I allowed at that time that he had an elegant chance of finding what he wanted still living, but it was just one chance in a million or two against it. That's where I missed my guess.

I reckon it was clost onto a year after that conversation that I come into Blueblanket again with some freight. Just happened thataway. As soon as I'd got my bulls corralled and fed I went to Henry Frush's to feed myself, and there was Clyde fresh and apple-cheeked as ever, or more so, in a new-laundered seersucker coat and a baby-blue necktie. Myra Frush was serving him just as I come in — dropping things round him, sort of, in a way that surprised me. I took notice that he got an extry small-sized piece of steak cut from near the horns, burned in the middle and pink round the edges, and that his tomatoes wasn't much more than the dab of a teaspoon in the dish, and his baked potato had bad skin trouble. I also noticed that he didn't seem to mind it and was in good sperrits. Myra gave me a glad smile of welcome, which I sure appreciated, she being considerable of a girl, with the liveliest pair of black eyes you ever seen, and teeth as white as her eyes was black, and plump as a little pattridge. Her and me was old friends too.

"Hungry, Mr. Stegg?" she asks, when our greetings was over.

"Kind of finicky, my dear," I says, with an eye on Clyde's plate. "Poorly! Poorly! I feel like my appetite needed temptation to overcome. If you was to set down and let me feast my eyes on you it might do me more good than mere vittles."

She tossed her pretty head. "Oh, there's girls that's a heap more worth looking at than what I am, round here," she says. "I might take away what little appetite you've got if you gave me more'n a glance. You'd better eat first and then go call on 'em." Saying which, she turns away and kicks into the kitchen.

"What's biting Myra?" I asks Clyde. "Seems like I've hurt her feelings some way."

"She takes streaks," says Clyde. "She's a right lovely girl and she can cook when she wants to, but somehow I've found her sort of notional. One day she's as pleasant as a basket of chips and the next time you see her she ain't like the same person at all." He sighed. "Too bad!" he says, "because otherwise I — yes, it's too bad she's like that. I reckon that the man she gets would have to watch out for danger signals a good part of the time and govern himself according, if he wanted to lead a peaceful life right along."

"I've known husbands here and there that deemed it advisable to do that with their wives," I says. "You'll find such once in a while. But if there's any girl in Blueblanket that's better worth looking at than little Myra I'd like to see her."

Clyde smiled at his steak. "Well, your eyesight don't seem to be failing yet," he says. "If you was to stay round Blueblanket a spell I don't know but you might have that pleasure. The city ain't got so populous but what it's possible."

"Yes?" says I.

"Yes," says he, and turned the smile in my direction.

"O-ho!" says I.

"I won't say you are wrong," says he, widening it. Then, looking serious and lowering his voice, he says: "I know that you wouldn't repeat nothing, Mr. Stegg, and I ain't telling it round; but I remember we was talking on the subject the last time you was here. Well, sir, I won't say I'm quite sure, but I think — I think I've found the right kind of a young lady."

"With all the specifications?" I asked him.

"I think so, Mr. Stegg," he says. "I've been calling quite regular for the best part of a year now, and I needn't say that I've kept my eyes open, and I'm just about sure that I wouldn't make no mistake in asking her to be mine. I've compared her with every young lady that I ever knew and if I ain't deceived, which wouldn't be very easy done, I couldn't reasonably ask for more desirable qualities than what that young lady has got."

"You say she's good looking?" I says.

"It wouldn't be putting it too strong to say that she's a poet's dream of beautiful young maidenhood," says he, "though a blonde."

"And a good cook?"

"Particular gifted that way. Far out of the common."

"Intelligent? But she must be that. Is she good-tempered?"

"Unless I'm mistaken she's got the disposition of an angel of light," Clyde says. "And her mother told me only the other day that she makes her own dresses and trims her own hats. It just come up in the course of conversation; and the old lady owned up that Margarita was a better hand at buying than what she was — meat and groceries and such. She's got a certificate to teach eighth grade

school — not the old lady; Margarita — and you ought to see some of the things she's painted, hanging up in the setting room!

"She plays the organ at the Baptist Church, and the attendance has gone up sixty-five per cent since she begun, the Reverend Gillick tells me."

"At first blush she would seem to be worthy of you, Clyde," I says. "But don't you get too reckless and carried away by your enthusiasm and emotions, son," I told him. "Remember you ain't known her but a year and you might have overlooked some serious drawback. She might just regard you as a brother or a very dear friend, for instance," I says.

"I ain't afraid of that," he says, resuming his smile and giving a twist to one end of his mustache. "I might say — I wouldn't wish for it to go no further, and I know ——"

Just then the kitchen door flew open before Myra's fairy foot and she come in with my supper. There was a full-grown man's-size steak, smoking hot and browned to a turn, with a lump of butter on it melting and running down to mingle with the red juice; the tomatoes was more than liberal and inviting, and an Irish dermatology specialist couldn't have found nothing wrong with the potatoes I got. Besides that there was biscuit right out of a fresh pan in the oven, and a big wedge of layer cake and a dish of elegant prunes.

"If you can't eat this layout I'll bring you a bowl of sage tea and heat up some bricks to put to your feet," says Myra. "Catchup? Don't touch that bottle; it ain't fresh. I'll open a new one. You tell me if the coffee ain't the way you like it. How would you like some eggs? It wouldn't take more than a minute to fry up a few for you. I'd clean

forgot you was fond of eggs. I ought to be ashamed of myself. Well, tell me anything that you would like, Mr. Stegg, and I'll be tickled to death to get it for you. Ma's fixing up her hair to come in to see you."

Clyde got up and handed her his meal ticket to punch, which she done in the same careless, chilly, high-toned way that she'd dealt his grub. Clyde looked at the ticket when she'd give it back, and seen that she'd punched the previous hole twice, which he mentioned. "I don't want to take advantage of you and get a supper free," he says, smiling at her.

Myra's black eyes snapped simultaneous with the second punch, and her red cheeks got redder. "I hope you enjoyed your supper, Mr. Britten," she says, sort of disdainful.

"I'm truthful, as well as honest, Miss Frush," says Clyde. "I didn't enjoy my supper. Being you mentioned it I ain't enjoyed a meal here for a month or two, excepting when your ma or Hilda has served it to me. Not that I mind. I just happened to think of it when you spoke."

"Maybe if you prospected round town, sort of, and tried 'em all out again you might find a place to eat that would suit you in all respects," says Myra.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't," says Clyde, as good-natured as you please. "It's like Mr. Stegg says: Looking at you does a man more good than mere vittles."

"I'll thank you not to talk to me thataway," she says, and flounces off into the kitchen again.

Clyde grinned at me and then shook his head. "Streaky!" he says. "She never minded me talking to her thataway before. Well, I'd like to stop and gas with

you a while but I'm due elsewhere. I reckon you'll be pulling out bright and early in the morning, so I won't be apt to see you again for a while; but when you hit Blue-blanket again you're likely to find that I've decided in that matter we was speaking about, and acted according."

I told him that probably I wouldn't be back again for a year or two, and maybe by that time the matter we was speaking of would be settled one way or another, like he presumed it would be. I wouldn't have bet heavy on it just then, but the next morning I found that old Buck, my nigh wheeler, had busted the last bow I'd got and I had to wait until Albien opened up his store to get me a new set, and whilst I was in there Old Man Fletcher happened in and allowed that he needed a couple of yoke of well-broke good-pulling critters to rip up an eighty of tough sod, and I figured that I might spare him what he wanted from my outfit and pick up some likely three-year-olds to fill the gap; and while he was talking about it, kind of casual, here comes a flood of golden sunshine and a flock of nightingales into the store and takes my attention plumb off what I was a-saying to Old Man Fletcher and what Old Man Fletcher was a-saying to me.

"Who was that?" I asked Henry Albien when she'd got her pound of butter and gone out, a-leaving us in sudden gloom.

"Margarita Biglow," says Henry. "Her folks come here from out near Sundance about a year ago and the old man bought out Mackay's harness store. A right nice family. Clyde Britten ought to be able to tell you more about Margarita than anyone else, but in a general way I'd say that she was prominent among them present when

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good looks was handed out and wasn't slighted none in the distribution. I'll go as far as to say that," he says.

I'd have went that far. I'd have said she got the bluest eyes there was in stock at the time, and the cunningest little nose and the sweetest, smilingest mouth and goldenest hair and the gracefulest curves. And when they picked the voice to go with them features — where they don't always show the best judgment or even the kindest intentions — they sure gave that girl a voice worth listening to. And there wasn't not a flicker of an eyelash nor the swing of a skirt to show that she had any idea that she was anyways favored by Nature. That was what I liked about her.

"If you ain't interested and don't want to talk trade, just say so, and I won't waste no more time," says Old Man Fletcher, breaking in on my musings and waking me up. So I took him over to the corral to see the two yoke I had in mind to part with if compelled to, and before the morning was over I'd sold them to him. Then not to lose no time I got me a horse from the livery and rode out to the Z Bell ranch to look over a bunch of steers I'd heard of. On the way I done a considerable speculating about Cautious Clyde, and a considerabler about Margarita. Seemed like almost from the first Clyde had had the inside track with her. He'd got all them advantages that I've mentioned, which the other boys round town hadn't got, and while there had been some competition at first Margarita didn't encourage none of it. Seemed like she'd made up her mind what she wanted and was willing to wait till she got it. I figured that she must be tolerable sure of getting it in the long run, and could afford to wait. I'm great on figuring out things, me.

Well, as I was a-saying, I got to the Z Bell, and I was shacking up to the ranch house when a shock-headed, sawed-off, brown-faced, wide-mouthed, barrel-chested, bow-legged young son-of-a-gun come skittering up behind me and letting out a yelp, swatted me between the shoulder blades with a hand that seemed mostly extry solid and heavy bone. I swung round with purposes and intents to paste him prompt and plenty, but he ducked under my arm and spurred ahead, taking me with him and leaving my horse behind. I accompanied him a couple of rods in his rush, and then he pulled up short and dropped me easy on my feet, letting out another whoop.

I reckon I'd have had that boy's blood on my soul in something less than ten seconds but for two or three reasons. One was that I hadn't got no gun nor no breath, and the next was that he had slipped out of his saddle and was shaking me by the shoulders like I was a sieve of sand; the third reason was I'd got a quick look at him before he grabbed me for the second time and I reco'nized him: Bob Nivens, from up the Powder River, the toughest and worst little imp of Satan for a right well-meaning boy that ever risked his neck and reputation, free, glad and willing, whenever and wherever there wasn't no occasion for it in the world. And this here manhandling wasn't nothing but a mark of his esteem and affection.

"You — bleary — old — blister!" says he. "You — salivated — old — sagebrush — salamander — you! — Dog-gone — my ——"

I got my knee well home in the pit of his stomach and broke his hold; but he come at me again, his mouth stretched in a five-inch grin full of white teeth.

"Dog-gone my wild heart! I'm tickled to see you!" he says. "I knowed you by the lop of your ears a mile away back.

"Who chased you thisaway, anyway? How ——"

"Keep away from me or I'll do you a mischief," I says. "I ain't swallowed no fishbone, nor I ain't going to be treated like a tough steak. You may shake me by the hand if you want to, but if you ain't gentle about it I'll show you what real rough acting is. And now you might as well tell me what name you're going by here, so's I won't embarrass you before folks," I says.

"I'm going by the name of Mr. Nivens, now and here," he says. "As foreman and manager of this here outfit I'm to be addressed with humble respectfulness; but I'll let you call me Bob in private for the sake of old times. Come on in and we'll eat. One of the boys will look after that old plug of yours."

Naturally I thought he was codding, but it didn't take no more than the way he talked to the cook to give me a suspicion that he might be telling the truth, and when the said cook brought the grub strictly according to directions and waited on us himself I didn't need no more evidence. Of course nobody but one of the boys — a kid — called him Mr. Nivens, but Bobby was boss, all right.

I don't know nothing in this here world that's harder for a man to believe than that some young snipe that he's known and maybe spanked years ago has rose in them few years to pomp and power. It don't seem reasonable; nor yet right. Shucks! It couldn't be! I wasn't denying to myself that in them old days, when he wasn't up to some deviltry, Bobby was hustling like the devil. He didn't

dilly-dally about nothing, and them bowlegs of his — which they was uncommonly bowed — covered a heap of ground from daylight to dark, even when they wasn't wrapped round a horse. And I wouldn't say that he wasn't smart or that he lacked good judgment, outside of being fond of foolishness — but that he was filling Jim Hopkinson's job, and him not much more than half as old as Jim, was plumb ridiculous. Seemed like he was, though. Sobered down and learned some sense of course — just like I had done myself, come to think of it.

And then I remembered that it hadn't been more than an hour or two before that he'd yanked me out of the saddle and generally conducted himself in a plumb, boisterous, undignified manner, and I concluded it must have been plain bull-headed luck, which would terminate mighty sudden, especially if the president of the company or one of the directors happened along unexpected and incognomen and heard him laugh or sing Little Ball of Yarn or something. He was a great singer, Bobby was, and that night he warbled some of the simple lays of the range so's you could have heard him, down wind, five or six miles. No, he couldn't last.

Then, next morning, he took me out to see them steers, and the way he conducted the negotiations made me change my mind again. I can most generally pick my choice so's the person selling ain't aware of it and feels sort of sorry for me; but not so with Bobby. I got what I wanted, but somehow — I ain't clear how it come — when I studied over it I seen that the Z Bell hadn't got none the worst of the deal by no means; and by the time I'd got back to Blueblanket I had to struggle to keep from brooding over the

incident. However, I'd got what I wanted, and reflecting on how I'd come out with Old Man Fletcher I hadn't done so bad on the whole.

"Where's Clyde to-night?" I asked Myra, not seeing no signs of him as I was finishing my supper.

"I reckon he's took my hint and found himself another place to eat," she says. "I reckon he's mad at me. Not that I care. He can get mad or get glad for all of me. I won't lose no sleep if he is mad, and you can tell him I said so if you like. Not that he'd care. I'm glad I told him what I did, come to that."

"I don't never take water on my prunes, Myra, my dear," I says.

"Oh, excuse me!" she says. "I thought it was the cream. I mean I thought your prunes was your coffee. I mean — I — I guess I'm about crazy. With a toothache."

"Wisdom tooth, I s'pose," I says. "They're right painful to cut; but you'll feel a heap better when it's through, and it won't seem so bad when you look back on it."

I sa'ntered out and walked down the street to the express office. The door was shut but it opened when I tried it, and Clyde got up out of his chair where he'd been a-setting with his head in his hands. I noticed that his hair was all rumpled and untidy and his face didn't look as if he'd shaved it a few minutes ago, like it usually did. He didn't smile either.

"What's the matter, son?" I asked him. "Toothache?"

"Toothache hell!" says Clyde, and you might have pushed me over by pointing a finger at me.

"Tut, tut!" I says. "Tut, tut, tut! Oh, naughty, naughty Clyde."

"I lost my temper," says he. "You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Stegg. But the sight of you right now — well, I might as well out with it," he says. "Sit down. Mr. Stegg, my hopes has been dashed in the mud. I've done lost my trust in womanhood and human nature and appearances and every dad-blamed thing. You can't tell me that white ain't black when you get right down clost and look at it careful. No, sir-ree! The acid in my disposition this moment is such that you show me a eighteen-carat warranted gold ring and I'll turn it green by breathing on it. One thing I'm thankful for is that I had sense enough to back out before it was too everlasting late! When I think of what might have happened in about another minute I realize that there is a Guiding Hand."

"Clyde," says I, "this suspense is killing of me."

"It was like this," he says. "I got to thinking of what you said the other night and I got an idea that you thought I was maybe putting off longer than was necessary and I come mighty nigh committing myself then, but I reckon something must have whispered to me to wait. Anyway, I did wait until I went up to the house last night; and almost the first thing she told me that the old folks and her little brother Jimmy had gone to the stereopticon at the Presbyterian Church. Somehow, when she said that I felt that the time had come — maybe. She certainly looked like a poet's dream of fair young maidenhood. It come to me as she was a-setting on the sofa that that was what she was — a poet's dream of fair young maidenhood."

"Sure!" I says. "You told me she was, I remember."

He sighed.

"Well, right there I decided; and when I decide it don't

take me long to act. I believe she knew I was a-going to. I allowed she was a considerable nervous and embarrassed and at the same time she didn't hate the idea of it. I don't know whether you know what I mean?"

I told him that I'd got a sort of an inkling.

"Well, I didn't want to be too brash about it, so I kind of led up to the subject by mentioning Henry Voss, who was going up to Rochford to get married to Susanna Smithson, who was down here visiting last fall. Margarita was real interested and allowed that she'd like to be at the wedding. She thought weddings was lovely. I says, 'Yes, but they don't always turn out well.'

"'Not all of them of course,' she says; 'but don't you think most of them do? I know in our own family my own sister has been married three years and she told me she didn't know what real happiness was before she married Clarence.'

"'I wonder how Clarence feels about it,' I says. I'd seen Clarence, and he didn't seem to me no wellspring of bubbling joyousness. It got me to thinking.

"'Of course he's happy,' says Margarita. 'If he wasn't Evangeline couldn't be. In married life the happiness of one means the happiness of both — don't you think?'

"'And the scrappiness of one means the scrappiness of both,' I says; and she says: 'Yes, but with love and forbearance there wasn't no need of scrapping. You put that real well,' she says. 'What made you think of it?'

"I said that it just sort of come to me, and I moved my chair up a little closer to the sofa — so's I could hear better what she said.

"'It shows so much thought,' she says.

"Well, right there I thought I'd act. 'I've been a-thinking quite a heap,' I says, and I leaned forward; but right then here come her little brother Jimmy into the room.

"'Why, Jimmy, dear!' says Margarita, 'why ain't you at the lecture?'

"'It wasn't no good,' says Jimmy. 'A passle of pictures like what we get at Sunday-school, and the same talk. I ducked out.'

"'I don't think you ought to have done that, darling,' says Margarita. 'I think you'd better go back again. Pa and Ma——'

"'Not on your life!' says Jimmy. 'I think I see myself going back!'

"'I'm afraid you will be punished, sweetheart,' says Margarita. 'Well, if you won't go back you can go round to Mr. Peters' and play with Wilson for a while — unless you'd sooner go to bed.'

"'I'll stay here,' says Jimmy.

"'Darling,' says Margarita, 'you know you ain't allowed to come in here when there's company — unless you have your face and neck washed and your hair combed, anyway. Do you want sister to wash your face? Well, run along and play with Wilson, then.'

"'Why can't I stay here?'

"Margarita got up. 'I guess I'd better put you to bed,' she says; and at that Jimmy scooted, and she shut the door.

"'He knows he can always take advantage of me,' she says, laughing, as she come back and sat down again.

"'Maybe he's got it figured out that I ain't company,' I says, sort of meaning, and she laughed again a little.

"'Are you sure you're quite comfortable in that chair?' she asks.

"Before I thought, I said that I sure was, and then I felt like kicking myself; and then for a minute or two we didn't either of us say nothing, and then she says: 'You was saying——

"'Before Jimmy came in,' she goes on. 'You said you thought — and then you stopped.'

"'Why, yes,' I says, remembering. Then I studied just how it was I'd been going to put it.

"'It's just a girl's curiosity, I s'pose,' she says; and her eyewinkers sort of fluttered.

"I made out to swallow the lump that was blocking up my gangway of speech when I heard somebody breathing hard outside the door. I jerked my thumb, and Margarita got up. Simultaneous, we heard Jimmy's bootsoles hit the floor to the back of the house, and the outside door banged. Margarita come back, still smiling.

"'He ain't often as naughty as this,' she says. 'I guess he thought we was talking secrets. Is it a secret — what you thought?'

"'Maybe it isn't,' I says. 'Maybe you know it already.'

"'I'm sure I don't,' she says. 'Tell me.'

"'And maybe you wouldn't want to hear it,' I says.

"'Tell me what it is and I'll tell you,' she says.

"'That's a pretty ring you're wearing,' I says; and she held out her hand.

"I hitched a little closer and took a-holt of her fingers, so I could look at the ring better, and—— You know them electric batteries where you take a-holt of the handles and

they turn a crank? Well, it was something like that, and mighty soft and warm.

"'It's a m-moonstone,' she says in a low, trembly voice.

"I was just sliding over onto the sofa when the boards creaked in the passage outside, and I dropped her hand and settled back in my chair. Margarita didn't lose no time getting to the door, and she shut it behind her; and then I heard the kitchen door slam and something else go smack, smack, and the darnedest yell you ever did hear, cut short like murder had been done with a sandbag. I tipped-toed up to the door and held it ajar and listened. Gurgle, gurgle, bump, bump, yow! and then the cut-off; scuffle, smack, smack and cut-off.

"And then a muffled voice, real vicious, that I didn't hardly reco'nize and only caught a word or two of here and there: 'I hope I have, you . . . be skinned alive . . . do it, too . . . march right straight upstairs . . . a sound out of you. Hear me?' Then a clumping up the back stairs and a sniveling that was subdued real surprising. I shut the door again and got back to my chair, and the next minute Margarita come in, rather red in the face, but as sweet and smiling as ever I seen her.

"'Poor Jimmy!' she says. 'He's sleepy and tired and doesn't know it. I coaxed him to go to bed, and that will be the last of him until morning.'

"I looked her straight in the eye. 'You coaxed him, did you?' I says. 'Miss Biglow,' I says, 'will you allow me to ask you another question, while I'm asking, if you'd just as soon. Did you make them muffins that we had for supper last Sunday, and did you cook the chicken and fix the gravy without no assistance, like your mother said — or

didn't you?' I just naturally bored into her soul with a gimlet eye when I put that to her, but she didn't show no signs of shame, except she'd quit smiling. She looked at me as straight as I looked at her, for about twenty seconds.

"'You seem to be real interested in muffins and chicken and gravy, Mr. Britten,' she says.

"'I'm interested in the truth,' I told her. 'Dupliciousness is a thing I despise,' I says.

"'Well,' says she, as cool as you please, 'cooking ain't my long suit. I've got as far as boiling water so's you wouldn't hardly notice the scorch taste — when I've good luck — but I ain't real confident about that even. Ma lets on to brag on me just to give me encouragement; she don't mean to be duplicent.

"'You're looking at them pansies,' she continues after a minute. 'My cousin Ella done the pansies and I gilted the fry-pan and tied the ribbon on it.'

"'How did you get your certificate to teach school?' I asked her, trying to speak as ca'm as she done.

"'The superintendent was a friend of mine — Bill Waters,' she answers. 'He liked me real well. I reckon he'd have given me his whiskers if I'd wanted them. Anything else you'd like to know?'

"'That's a right pretty dress you've got on,' I says, a little sarcastical. 'You made that yourself, didn't you?'

"'All but the cutting and fitting and sewing,' she replies. 'I pulled out every basting thread there was in it with my own hands.'

"'I wonder how come you ever learned to play the organ?' I says.

"'I didn't have to learn; it come natural,' she answers. 'I liked to do it, and I'll do most anything I enjoy doing. If I enjoyed entertaining you any longer this evening I'd do that. I guess you put your hat under that other chair.'

"So that was all there was to it," says Clyde. "I didn't linger no longer. I concluded I'd been deceived in that girl and I'd had a mighty lucky escape."

"And that's what makes you so happy?" I says.

"That's what makes me so happy," says he. "But I ain't denying that I feel a heap disappointed."

"And that's what makes you so plumb miserable?" I says.

"It's sure unsettling," says he. "But I'd have been taking big chances if I had overlooked conduct like that there of hers — wouldn't I?" He looked at me like a dog waiting for a bone you was finishing.

"You certainly would," I told him. "It's a cinch that after a certain point she ain't got the disposition of a No. 1 first-class angel, and that she ain't above trying to make a good impression on a person that she wants to impress good. Every once in a while you run acrost a woman like that — and now and then a man. Them angels is sort of stay-at-home folks, seems like to me."

"And not being able to cook nor nothing!" says Clyde. "I can cook, but I'll be dog-gone if I want to do it for a family. I wouldn't be happy a-doing it, and in married life the unhappiness of one means the unhappiness of both."

"You put that so well, Clyde," I says, and I went away and left him holding his head and staring at the knob of the safe with a glaze in his eyes.

Bobby had promised to send in one of the boys with them steers of mine the next morning, being as I couldn't take them myself with the old plug I'd got from the livery; so next morning I didn't have nothing to do but sit in the shade in front of Albien's store and watch out for 'em. After a while I seen their dust a-coming over the rise, and just as they got into Main Street a sweet voice at my elbow says, "Won't you please let me pass?" and I started back that violent and sudden that I nearly went over backward.

I was blocking up the way for Margarita Biglow. Of course I apologized like the polished gentleman what I am, and the smile I got was something to make a man feel for the next twenty-four hours that he amounted to some considerable and that life was plenty worth while living. She went into the store and I went into a trance, from which I was presently roused by opprobrious and disrespectful epithets requesting me to take my such-and-soed steers and be dog-gone to me.

"Drive them round to Peckinpaugh's corral, my good young man," I says; "and when you've done that come back and I'll see what can be done about altering that face of yours."

"Yes, sir," says Bobby. "Peckinpaugh's corral? Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'll attend to it right away, sir, having nothing else to do, and esteeming it an honor and a privilege to be permitted. Like thunder I will! Come out from behind them brindle whiskers and show signs of life, you deleterious old gorilla."

Just then the steers discovered a wagon with the box half full of hay, that some careless person had left, and they proceeded to take a light lunch. I thought it was a pity to

disturb them being as Peckinpaugh wasn't none too liberal with his feed, so I invited Bobby to light and look at his saddle.

"I'd like to," says he, "but I've got to go get a package from the express office and then skip lightsomely back to the ranch. I'm busier than a buck ant right now, but I had to come in myself for that package and I thought I might as well bring your ——"

He stopped short and I could see his chest heave up as he drew in his breath. Margarita Biglow had come out of the store, her arms loaded with packages, and I'll mention that she didn't forget to give me another smile as she passed. That time it made me feel like I would some morning in February, when I poked my head out of the cabin door to see what made the eaves drip and got the first puff of the Chinook against my cheek. I don't know what it reminded Bobby of, but from the way he wheeled his horse and looked after her as she tripped along it's a cinch that he was powerful affected.

"What was you remarking, Bobby?" I asked him.

I reckon he didn't hear me. If lightning had struck the store, and a cyclone and an earthquake and a waterspout or two had followed, with Hades let out for recess close behind, I doubt if he would have noticed it. What he did notice was that Margarita had dropped a couple of her packages. One of them was a can of something, and it rolled clear to the middle of the street and might have rolled farther if Bobby hadn't stopped it. I may be mistaken by a few inches and a second or two, but I judge that can was a hundred yards from us when it struck the ground and Bobby threw his leg over from the horn of the saddle where

he was resting it and put the spur to his horse. The hundred yards was covered in about the time it takes a mule to flick his left ear, and it took something less than that for Bobby to swing over and grab the can on the keen run. It was sure prompt action. A second later my young impulsive friend was standing before Margarita with his hat off and the can under his arm.

"I'll take the rest of them things and pack them for you, ma'am, if you'd just as soon let me," he says. "I'm going the same way as what you are."

"Well, I'm sure!" says Margarita, staring at him.

"No reason why you shouldn't be," says Bobby; and he had a smile of his own that made folks forget how plumb homely he was. "I'm honest as the day is long," he says. "I'm as able as Adam's second son and as willing as William."

"Was William willing?" asks Margarita, trying to keep from smiling.

"He was right hungry and they rung the dinner bell for him," says Bobby, taking the other package from her, that she'd just picked up, and tucking it under his arm with the can and holding out his hand for more.

"My name isn't even Williamette," says the young woman, mighty sober. "Will you kindly please to give me them things of mine, if you'll be so good." She held out her hand, and Bobby took and shook it, gentle and respectful, until she jerked it away, dropping a bunch of celery with the jerk, which Bobby picked up.

"Now give me them eggs and I'll compromise and let you carry the bottle," he says. "That will show you I ain't got no designs on whatever there is in it."

"It's vinegar," says Margarita. "Well, take them, then. But I must say —— How do you know you're going the same way as me?"

"You just make a start once, and see how quick I'll prove it," says Bobby.

I seen all this from the porch. I seen them talking and could almost hear what they said. I seen Bobby, a perfect stranger, smiling at this dream of fair young maidenhood and taking away her property from her piece by piece, and finally I heard them both laugh and watched them walk away together. Bobby's horse stood in the street right where he was left, and he looked after them sort of curious and after a while shook his head as if he disapproved a heap of such goings-on and sidled up to join the lunch party at the wagon. I waited, it must have been an hour, until the hay was all gone, and then I got on Bobby's horse and drove the steers to Peckinpaugh's and left the outfit there and went back to the store. Pretty soon along come Bobby, on foot and in a hurry.

"Where's your horse, son?" I asked him.

He looked a considerable took aback. "Why, that's so!" says he. "I did have a horse, didn't I? Well, let it go. What I need now is two horses and the best light rig there is in town. I reckon I'll see to that right away. Stable's down the street, ain't it?"

"Come back here!" I says. "Before you get out any light rigs I've got to know the whys and wherefores. Am I correct in assuming that you are going to take some young lady out riding? Yes? The said young lady being Miss Margarita Biglow? Yes? Then sit down and listen to me,

because I've got something to tell you about that young lady that you had ought to know. In the first pace I understood you to say that you was busy at the ranch and didn't have no time to waste?"

"Be easy," says Bobby, grinning. "I won't waste no time."

"Then what have you been doing the last hour or two?" I says.

"Getting acquainted with my future wife and my future wife's family," says Bobby. "And not so dog-gone futurious at that. I tell you this so that you may know in case it has any bearings on what you were going to tell me." He looked at me straight and sober when he said that. "Go ahead, if you think it best, because I've got to get that rig."

"I'm surprised," I says. "I'm sure surprised at a man of your reasonable rapid actions fooling and frittering with rigs when you might just as well have throwed your future wife acrost your saddle right off, and lit out for the nearest preacher's, whether or no."

"I don't say that there ain't sense in what you say," says Bobby, "but I aim to have Mrs. Nevins travel in comfort when comfort is to be had for love or money or personal violence up to and including bloodshed if necessary. But if there's no other business——"

"There is," I says. "I've got a high respect and admiration for a certain person, but I'm informed that angels has better dispositions in some respects, like mislaying their tempers when there's just cause and reason for it; what's more, she ain't no cook to speak of, and there's grave doubts about her being able to paint pansies on a fry-pan or

teach eighth-grade school. You may hear to the contrary, but what I say is, investigate. In married life the dyspepsia of one means merry something popping for two sooner or later and sooner than not. I'm talking as your friend — your old, tried and trusted friend. I say to you, investigate; look afore you leap. That's all I've got to say."

"It's a plenty," says Bobby, mighty scornful. "Why, you old stick-in-the-gumbo, do you reckon I ain't got eyes in my head and ears sticking out on each side thereof? Look! You watch me break the best records for long leaps. If I'd been short-sighted I wouldn't never have started. Can't cook! Say, haven't I got a cook at the ranch? As for mislaying temper, she may get mad at me, but I'll bet you she won't stay mad long, and if she wants to use me for a doormat I'll have 'Welcome' wove in the back of my coat and lay me down on the doorstep and enjoy myself all through the muddy weather. Investigate! I've put in a full hour investigating already; and dog-gone my wild heart! I'm going to put in sixty or seventy years more with her right under my eye if I can fool her like I expect to do. I realize I'm going to play her a low-down, mean trick, marrying her, but I ain't got no more scruples or decency than a sheep herder when it comes to that. I'm just that ornery. So long!"

His spurs clink-clanked double-quick time along the sidewalk as far as the livery, and there he disappeared. I got up and sa'ntered that way and looked in. Joe Tregear and Clippy Dargan had their best buggy trundled out and were going at it with sponge and chamois whilst Bobby and another helper of Joe's were watering a pair of matched sor-

rels. When they was through drinking, Bobby turned over the one he was holding to the boy. "You see that they shine!" he says. "You've got half an hour to get 'em slicked up. I'll be back maybe in twenty minutes."

"Coming with me to eat, Bobby?" I says, stepping up alongside him as he come out.

"What in blazes would I want to eat for?" he says. "Don't talk foolishness to me when I'm pressed for time. Whichaway is the barber shop? Never mind. I see the pole."

I couldn't keep up with him, but I tagged along and got there as Hank Evans was tucking a towel into his neck. "A dollar a minute for ten minutes is good pay," says Hank, dabbing on the lather with one hand and rubbing it in with the other. "I'll earn it," he says, making a lightning play on the strop. "If I cut you I'll cut so you can't cut back," he says, beginning to scrape. "You might be a-shaking up that bay rum for me while you're waiting, Mr. Stegg," he says, moving over to the other cheek. "I can talk and do this too," he proceeds, tackling the chin. "And now — there! Four minutes flat, by ginger! Set up, Mister Man, and we'll see what we can do with the upland crop in the other six."

Four more minutes was devoted to the hair trimming, and the other two was consumed by hot towels, bay rum, brushes and tonic. It was a jim-dandy job, too, and gave Hank something to brag about for the rest of his life. I thought that Bobby would naturally have a little time to take nourishment before the team was ready for him, but he seemed real peevish when I mentioned it again.

"You don't think of nothing but putting feed into yourself," he says. "Some of these days you'll get foundered and then you'll be sole mourner."

"Going to the express office for that important package?" I asked him as I trotted along.

He didn't deign no reply, but commenced to unbutton his shirt and turned into Sol Bloom's gents' furnishing and clothing, where he took said garment off before Sol could get from the back of the store to greet him. Right there the swift sale and lightning change records was smashed, and inside of ten minutes more Bobby walked out, a new being, leaving his old clothes, the best part of a hundred dollars and a strong smell of bay rum behind him.

"I'll go with you to the livery and identify you, Bobby," I says.

He stopped in his tracks. "You can go to dinner," he says, "or you can go to Jerusalem or Gehenna, but you can't go no farther with me to-day. There ain't no better company than what you are," he says, "exceptin' on occasions when there's other company that a person would prefer to have without you. I'd like to ask you to go along with us, but we would be cramped for room for one thing, and it would be highly disagreeable to me for another — if you get my meaning."

I told him that he was depriving the young lady of pleasant society, but she might be fond enough of fresh air and scenery to enjoy the ride in a way, and I went to dinner.

Ma Frush waited on me. I asked her where Myra was and she allowed, kind of short, that Myra was some place or another, and altogether wasn't as chatty as usual. Pretty soon Clyde come in, looking as if he'd been wrung out and

drawed through a knot hole. He just nodded to me as he sat down and he didn't no more than toy with his vittles, which this time was about as good as what I got.

"Still happy, Clyde?" I asked him. "Too happy to eat?"

"Mr. Stegg," he says, "there's subjects that it ain't proper to jest about; but if you ain't jesting and want to know, I ain't happy but contrariwise. I'm beginning to think that I was sort of hasty the other night in the matter that I was telling you about. Sort of precipitate."

"That was ever your great fault, son," I says.

"I had ought to have took into account that that there near relative of the party in question needs licking early and often, on general principles," he says. "He was into the office a while ago and it was all I could do to keep my hands off'n him."

"Meaning little J.?" I asked.

"Meaning little J.," he says. "A freckled young limb of the devil, if you ask me. If a certain party had took the hide right off'n him on the occasion alluded to I wouldn't be disposed to blame her, come to think it over. My present opinion is that she was real sweet and patient. Another thing I'd ought to have considered was that she was in a anxious frame of mind, not knowing for sure but what I was a trifler — which I ain't. So I hadn't ought to have started in asking them harsh personal questions. I've a notion to go up to the house and apologize and set her mind at rest as to my intentions. I'd go up right now only ——"

"Yes?" I says.

"That hell's baby — er — J. was telling me about some low cow-puncher or another carrying Mar — a certain per-

son's groceries home for her and staying there the best part of the morning exchanging coarse pleasantries with the old lady and indulging in familiarities with a certain person in a fresh and unwarranted manner, and promising J. a pony from the ranch — all lies probably. But he said a certain person was going buggy riding with this uncouth calf rustler after dinner. Say, I'd rejoice to be a member of the B. family, just to get the privilege of spanking J. I'd think he was lying about the buggy riding, but I certainly did notice a buggy going up toward the house just before I come in here. It went by so quick I couldn't see who was in it, but I don't think it was the bow-legged, frog-faced, dusty young devil in chaps that J. pointed out to me about half an hour before. The hat wasn't the same. Anyway, I think I'll wait until after supper now."

"You seem to have forgotten something, Clyde," I says. "Granting and admitting that a certain person had a good excuse for chastising her near relative, J., that don't make her no good cook and dressmaker and milliner and instructor of youth in the eighth grade and fry-pan decorator dee lucks. Ain't you overlooking them points, son?"

"No," says Clyde, "I ain't. But what do them points amount to? See here." He waved his hand at his dinner. "There's good grub, but I ain't got no stomach for it," he says. "If it was humming birds on toast and broiled goldfish and hothouse-grape pie à la mode it would be just the same without — a certain person; and with her I feel I could relish rawhide and ragweed roots. You could show me the most elegant chromo in a diamond-studded frame and it wouldn't give me the satisfaction I'd feel if there wasn't no dissensions between us — not if she'd painted it

and give it nine coats of varnish. If she couldn't no more than make her mark I wouldn't care particular. I could learn her all she'd need to know. In married life the education of one — well, you know what I mean anyway. I'm a-going up to the house after supper and I don't care if the whole family stays round. I'm a-going to take the leap. And I'll sure make that officious bundle-carrier leap, too, if he horns in again with buggy-riding propositions. My mind is sure made up now!"

He smiled for the first time as he got up, and he walked out with a real gallus gait.

What I ought to have done was yoked up my bulls and started for Rapid, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to do it. This here life of ours is mighty dull and much about the same as a general thing, and when there's any interesting little breaks in it I love to linger where it's going on and make bets with myself on the breakage. So I allowed I'd give Blueblanket another day and see what happened. I was a-getting rusty in my pool, too, so I put in the afternoon at Gantz's parlors, improving it and working up an appetite for supper. About six o'clock I hung my cue in the rack, collected my cigars and started for Frush's, feeling as if I could assimilate all and sundry that was set before me. On the way I looked in at the livery to see if Bobby had got back. He hadn't, so I crossed the street and run into Clyde at Frush's door. I had to step back and take a second look at him before I could believe it.

The peachy blooms was back on his cheek as fresh as ever, and his little mustache was turned up at the ends as cute as a coon's tail; his eyes was bright and his necktie a

baby blue, to match the stripe in his seersucker, and when he hung up his hat his hair looked as if it had been parted with a chalk line and smoothed down on either side with a flatiron. He was sure a gay and pleasing sight, and when we sat down at the table he commenced to babble like a care-free schoolgirl.

"You're looking better than what you did at noon, Clyde," I says after a while.

"I'm feeling better, Mr. Stegg," he says. "In the words of the poet:

I feel about as happy as a big sunflower
That nods and bends in the breezes,
My heart is just as light as the winds that blows
The leaves from off the treeses.

"That's the way I'm feeling," he says. "And there's a-going to be two people happy to-night," he says.

"Making other folks happy is the secret of true happiness," I says. "I can see a certain person's eyes glisten with joy when she knows she's forgiven," I says. "There ain't no doubt about it that forgiveness is divine. But ain't you a little sort of nervous? No? Well, I reckon you're right to be cheerful while you can."

"You see I'm eating my supper to-night, don't you?" he says, smiling. And he was.

But he didn't finish it. The words was no sooner out of his mouth and a wedge of steak in than the dining-room door busted open and Bobby Nivens explodes into the room with a loud glad cry, grabs my hand and the spoon I was using and shook them until I thought my good right arm was a-going to follow what had been in the spoon.

"My dear old faithful friend!" he says, rumpling my hair. "The blithe companion of my boyhood days a-filling himself up as of yore! How are you and how's Buck and Bright? Not changed a particle since I last saw your loved face and we parted in sadness and in tears!"

He skimmed his new hat at a peg the farther side of the room, pulled out a chair and sat down — one wide, white grin.

"If this ain't a sure-enough reonion!" he says, beaming at Clyde, who wasn't by no means beaming at him.

Then he turns to Ma Frush, who had come up, and tells her how the fame of her meals had reached him and drawed him from far and wide, and that he hadn't et for the nine days he'd been on the road, but he could wait for breakfast if it was a-going to make her any trouble, and a mess of foolishness like that that sent ma off to the kitchen giggling. Then he reached out and pulled my ear over to him and whispered in one of them whispers that don't carry more'n forty rods or so:

"If you ain't got no engagement and no conscientious objections to putting on a clean shirt I'd be pleased and honored by your company at my nuptials to-night."

"What!" I shouts.

He hauled off and, making a noise like a young rooster practicing voice-placing, he slapped me where I was still sore from his last attack. I looked acrost the table at Clyde, and he had turned the color of his pocket handkerchief, and his lower lip had sagged from his gums.

"At eight P. M. sharp, at the residence of the bride's parents and her little brother James," Bobby goes on. "The Reverend Spotkin officiating. Following the cere-

mony the happy couple will hit the cool evening breeze for the Z Bell ranch, their future home. Please omit footgear. Kiss me, Steggie! Oh, kiss me and give me your blessing!"

He seen me look at Clyde, who was a-shivering like he felt a draft, but being somewhat excited and not noticing anything out of the way, I suppose, he gives Clyde a right gracious and affable smile.

"I don't know you, gentle stranger," he says, "but I sure like you. I like everybody, me. I've known the time when my heart didn't warm to humanity like it's a-glowing now and when I wouldn't have asked you to grace my wedding without previous acquaintance, but if ——"

"I don't know you," says Clyde, shivering worse than ever and talking with his teeth shut, "and I'm sure I don't like you. I don't like your looks nor the way you talk nor yet the color of your hair — if you get the drift of my remarks."

Bobby turned to me with a pained look. "He don't like me, Steggie," he said, real plaintive. "Now how do you account for that? I come to him making the peace sign and he starts to shooting from under his blanket thisaway. What would you do? Do you reckon he knows how his unkindness hurts me or doesn't he give a durn? Would you try to win his friendship right now or do you reckon I'd better leave it to time? This is sure a sad blow."

"Let me tell you something," says Clyde, the color coming back to his face with a rush. "When you talk about sad blowing ——"

He stopped as Ma Frush came in, and waited until she'd given Bobby his supper and gone out again.

"Yes?" says Bobby, buttering a biscuit and smiling at him encouragingly.

"I was going to say that your mouth is too big and your jaw too slack," says Clyde, pushing his chair back and getting up.

"So I've been told," says Bobby, setting his teeth into the biscuit and starting to cut his steak. "You're probably right; but how can you help it, poor thing?"

"I might," says Clyde, dodging the grab I made at him and coming round the table. "Get up!" he says to Bobby, but Bobby didn't get up.

"I ain't destructive," he says to me. "He's so pretty I'd hate to spoil him. You talk to him quietly and divert his mind, Steggie. My voice seems to irritate him.

"Dog-gone you!" Clyde shrieked.

He drew back his fist and swung it with all his force at Bobby's objectionable jaw. I reckon that swing would have done considerable damage if it had landed, but Bobby happened to stoop just then. He rose up laughing as the swing spun Clyde round; and then when the misguided lad came at him again wide open he reached in and tapped him on the nose just hard enough to start the crimson lifeblood. It was meant to be a light tap, I could see that, just a good-natured hint; but Clyde wouldn't be satisfied to take it, and made another rush, getting Bobby's fist just under the right eye and falling backward over a chair against Ma Frush and Myra, who had come a-running in.

Bobby was stepping forward to help him up, but I reckon his kind intentions was misunderstood; anyway, he didn't take but two forward steps; the rest was backward, and Myra followed him up close, swinging her broom left and

right and telling him what she thought of him in no uncertain tones. If that broom had happened to been an ax Bobby would have been killed too dead to skin six or seven times before he reached the door and got out in the street, where Myra was too much of a lady to chase him.

"You miserable, ugly, bloodthirsty brute!" she said; and throwed the broom at him and hit a mule that was hitched to a post on the other side of the street, which made the mule wheel round and kick Perry Ackerman's real-estate bulletin board through his office window. I come out a minute or two later and found Bobby paying Perry for the window, and Old Bill Oliver, the marshal, coaxing the mule off the sidewalk.

"Well, how's the patient?" says Bobby, taking his hat, which I had brung out to him.

"He's regained consciousness and with careful nursing, which he's sure getting, he'll probably be able to see out of both eyes by to-morrow," I told him.

"What do you reckon made that Willieboy take that crazy spell?" Bobby muses. "I hope the young lady ain't a-going to suffer owing to her recent exertions," he continues as he walked along.

"I ain't so sure of that," I says.

What I was a-thinking of was Myra running back to help Clyde into the sitting room whether he needed help or not and a-stanching the gore and a-laving his poor eye with a gentle hand as he lay on the sofa. It had reminded me of that piece of poetry about woman in our hours of ease, and I'd begun to speak it but Myra turned on me real capricious and told me that if I couldn't act like I had sense I'd better get out of here. Otherwise I'd have stayed a while longer.

I'd took notice though that there were moist gleams of gratitude in Clyde's operating eye.

Bobby hung on to me until I'd got into my war sack and arrayed myself similar to a wedding guest, and then we drove the sorrels up to Biglow's, loading the preacher in on the way. Up to that time I'd thought Bobby might be trying to fool me, even when he begun to act nervous and clinging. He said he'd figured that Margarita wouldn't have no time before eight o'clock to change more'n her dress, but maybe he had delayed the game long enough for her to include her mind. He'd made the excuse to the old folks that he had to take a trip to Omaha as soon as he got back to the ranch and he'd got Henry Albien and Vandervoort, of the Drovers National, to testify that he was honest and respectable and rising and tolerable well heeled and such like, but all the same he had a sort of sinking sensation that something was a-going to happen.

And something did happen sure enough. About twenty-five minutes after he had trotted in at the door he walked out again with Mrs. Bobby Nivens on his arm, and if he had been a mile high by two miles wide he couldn't have give you more the idea of being all swelled up with pride and joyfulness; and taking a look at Margarita, blushing, half laughing and half crying, and pretty as a pink rosebud, you'd have thought she was reason a-plenty for them dimensions, if such they had been. He helped her into the rig like she was valuable eggshell china, whilst I made out to hold the sorrels' heads. It was a bright moonlight and the road lay clear and straight before them.

"Let her go, Gallagher!" Bobby sings out, and I jumped aside just quick enough and none too quick, simultaneous

with a scattering fire of old shoes which mostly fell about fifty yards short; and that was the last of Bobby for a while.

"Well, Reverend," I says to the preacher a few minutes later, "I reckon we've done all the damage we can and we might as well be heading for home."

"I reckon we might, Mr. Stegg," says he.

So we set out together, and he was so entertaining that I walked a piece out of my way with him to his door. Just as we was opening the gate a figure moved out of the shadows toward us, and when it struck the moonlight we seen it had a swelled nose and a bunged-up eye.

"Mr. Spotkin," it says, "might I have a word or two with you in private?"

I waited until they got through and the Reverend had gone in and then I waited until Clyde spoke.

"I suppose you're a-wondering what this means," he says.

"Seems like it means business," I answered.

"You're right," he says. "Mr. Stegg, I understand that a certain person is married and gone off with her husband, and further that her husband never seen her before this morning but made up his mind prompt when he did see her. That's right, ain't it?"

I said it was.

"I wish that certain person joy and happiness," he says. "I feel I was mistaken in her, but all the same I wish her joy and I don't bear her husband no malice. I don't say that I like him or his ways or actions," he says, fingering his nose sort of delicate, "but I'm free to say I think he's

got the right idea of rushing a thing through. And that's what I aim to do myself. I decided on that about a half an hour ago as I came out of Frush's, where Miss Myra had been tending me like a sweet and lovely angel of light. Miss Myra ain't no stranger to me and some time ago I'd even thought of asking her to be mine, so to speak, but I never anticipated what she was until to-night. That's why I come up here to see the Reverend. I aim to make sure he wouldn't go to bed before I could get Miss Myra up here. And if you'd like to attend on the ceremony ——"

"Well, well!" I says. "Good for you, Clyde! So little Myra's a-going to take pity on you! Sure I'll stand up with you."

"Er — I ain't exactly told her what my plans is yet," he says, "but I'm going right over this minute to do so. I'm a-going to rush it through. She can just throw something over her head and the Reverend is going to wait up for us. I wouldn't wait until morning, not for no money. I know what I want now and I ain't going to dally."

"Myra may have gone to bed by this time," I says as we struck Main Street.

"There's a light still a-burning in the setting-room," Clyde says. "If you don't mind waiting for a little while outside and keeping your eye on the side door I won't be more'n a few minutes. Excuse me."

He left me and run ahead. I slowed up and watched him go into the side door and then I sat down on the edge of the sidewalk and tried to get my milling thoughts steadied and bedded down. I don't think I'd got more'n two-thirds of my pipe smoked when the door opened again, a patch of yellow light.

"Here they come," I says to myself, and got up.

But I couldn't make out more than Clyde, and I couldn't make him out good after the door shut. The next thing, I seen him headed down the street at a lively clip toward the express office, but he hadn't gone a hundred yards before he stopped short and took off his hat and slammed it down on the ground. Then he looked round and seen me and come pelting up. He hadn't picked up his hat and his hair was every which way and the rich green and dark purple of his eye showed up strong aginst a dead white.

"Will you do me a favor, Mr. Stegg?" he asks, in a strained, husky voice. "If you'll kindly oblige me by going back to the Reverend Spotkin.

"Tell him — tell him that I'll see him later and explain, but — but he won't need to wait up for me."

He started to say something else, but he couldn't seem to get it out, and then he turned and scooted off again. I saw him go into the express office and heard the slam of the door, but though I hung round quite a while I didn't see so much light as a man would make striking a match. There wasn't but one conclusion to come to. Myra had had another of them streaky spells that Clyde had mistrusted when his judgment was cool, and poor Clyde had finally lep' with his eyes shut and fell short.

"And that," concluded the old bullwhacker, "is most always the way it goes."

"It didn't go so badly for him, I should say," remarked Selby judicially. "No doubt his self-esteem was jarred, but in the first instance his prudence saved him from marrying a somewhat useless, if ornamental, person; and, *secun-*

dum, his luck snatched him from the brink of an alliance with a budding holy terror."

"It didn't, and she ain't — only on occasion," said the old bullwhacker. "I've et Mrs. Nivens' own personal cooking off a dinner-set that she done painted herself, and in all respects my opinion is that she come up to Clyde's first specifications at the start and passed them on the quarter stretch. Myra certainly kept Clyde a-waiting while she made sure and investigated and looked round like she'd told him she'd do that night he tried to stampede her, but a couple of years after she took another streak and throwed something over her head and married him. What she throwed didn't cost her more'n ten or twelve dollars then, but now, I understand, it's costing Clyde anywheres from twenty to forty dollars a throw, and she don't make her own dresses, either. So there you are."

"Then what's your theory?" asked Slyfield.

"Gentlemen," said the old bullwhacker, "in this here matter of matrimony my theory is that a man sure ought to look ahead mighty careful and go awful slow —— But shucks! It won't do him a particle of good."

IV

THE BIRD IN THE HAND

THE Sidney stage, with its six fresh horses in fine exuberant spirits, had got a fair start and was making an easy twelve on the level stretch to the Gap when the stock tender of the Box Elder station came out of the barn, wiping his forehead and manifesting every sign of physical exhaustion.

"Hitch! hitch! hitch! in poverty, hunger and dirt!" he sighed; "and then unhitch and repeat; and then feed, and then water — and repeat; and clean half a dozen sets of harness and curry and brush — and repeat; and if that ain't Hades and repeat, you tell me — but tell me by mail if you've any respect for your hide."

He sank into the other chair and groaned. The old bull-whacker, who occupied the rawhide chaise-longue, cocked a contemplative eye at him and knocked the ashes from his pipe on his boot heel.

"It sure is what you say it is, Hank," agreed the veteran. "I feel for you, as the feller says, but I can't reach you. If you'd only had the sense to get rich early in life you wouldn't have to put in four hours per diem of grinding toil for a trifling sixty and grub. Ain't that what you're getting for these here arduous tasks?"

"It's what I'm supposed to get," replied the stock tender.

"If the company would hire a new paymaster that played a square game I might get it, and a few dollars to boot, but a common, ordinary wolf like me don't stand no show with Jensen. He paid off the whole line with the same deck of cards last month — just went through the hollow form of passing out greenbacks, and then 'How about a little game of stud?' — and took 'em back. All the boys got was the evening's entertainment. Yes, I ought to have got rich early in life. I had my chances."

"We've all had 'em," said the old bullwhacker. "I could have got twenty acres of the business section in Omaha one time for a barrel of whisky. I remember Sioux City afore it got its first boom, when a pair of old boots would have made me the biggest real-estate owner in town. But I didn't have no more than a pint flask when I was in Omaha and I was afraid of snakes; and when Opportunity come a-knocking in Sioux City I was wearing them boots on my own feet. I've had elegant shows to get affluent by taking a chance, but I never was no sport. I was like Sim Broderick got to be. Remember Simmy? Used to be county clerk and register of deeds of Minnekahta in the eighties."

The stock tender had only the haziest recollection of Mr. Broderick, but he was curious to know.

"Well, I always liked Simmy," said the old bullwhacker. "He was a right nice boy, polite and cheerful and freckled and foolish. You take a sandy-haired little rooster with them points and you'll find most people like 'em. Everybody in Minnekahta County had a good word for Sim Broderick — slipped in with them that they applied contrariwise. They'd grant you that he was this and that, and

that he done thus and so and didn't do divers and sundries, but they'd all tell you that there wasn't no real harm in him and that he was a right nice boy and a sport. He was certainly a sport. All he asked was a slight element of uncertainty and he'd declare himself in, no matter what. Either end of a bet would suit him. He wasn't no extry rider, but when he worked for the Hashknife he'd straddle anything that run and jumped on four legs, just out of curiosity to see what would happen; similar, being a runt and having no science, he'd stand up to the huskiest two-fisted devil that ever cleaned out a camp, on the off chance of licking him. If you'd bantered him to hit a stick of giant with a twelve-pound sledge and see if he could dodge quick enough he'd have tried it once.

"Now I claim to be a judge of human nature. I've studied on it until I know a heap more about folks and their weaknesses than what they do themselves. I could tell you things about yourself that you'd probably deny right out, and mebbe some of these days I will. I do tell folks what's wrong with them once in a while and try to point out how they can overcome them things. When Bud Watts of the Hashknife let Simmy go I told Simmy plain and straight just how many kinds of a cussed fool he was. I done it as tactful and kind as I knew how, but I put it to him straight.

"'You ginger-haired little whelp,' I says, 'somebody ought to take and just naturally exterminate you. If you'd been worth powder to blow you to blazes the wild coyote would have been howling mournfully o'er your narrow grave long afore this. Of course Watts gave you your time when he seen you was taking it right along. You ain't

done one honest-to-goodness day's work in all the twenty-five years you've used up,' I says. 'What's more,' says I, 'you're headed, tail up, for the penitentiary, and burning up the ground.'

"'Sho!' says Simmy. 'Do you reckon that's so, Mr. Stegg?'

"'I know it's so,' I told him. 'And why is it, you wart?'

"'Ah, that's the question,' he says, nodding his head, approving. 'Now we're getting down to cases. Why is it? Being as it is so, why so?'

"'Because you ain't got a lick of sense,' I says. 'If you'd get down to some kind of steady work and quit taking chances there'd be some hope for you.'

"'What chances was you alluding to, Mr. Stegg, sir, please?' he asks.

"'All kinds of chances, you no-account runt,' I says. 'For instance, the chances of calves' being orphans of unknown parentage that nobody ain't interested in and wouldn't never miss. Them three old cows that you've got wandering over the range may be right fecund and fruitful, but two calves apiece in a season is a liberal allowance for any breed I ever come acoss, and when you claim more for 'em surmises and suspicions is excited that leads to trouble.'

"'I reckon that's so,' says Simmy. 'Them stock-association snoopers don't believe in large cow families, seems like, do they, Mr. Stegg?'

"'They believe in increase but they draw the line at multiplying,' I says. 'In respect to them cows, you've been working the multiplication table until it's mighty rickety on its legs. You'd better get down to a steady

job, like I tell you. They're paying pick-an-shovel men two dollars and a half a day in the upper Hills.'

"Simmy took off one of his gloves and wiggled his limber fingers. 'Too hard on the hands,' he says. 'I'd be dealing every which way and spilling cards all over the floor. Not but I'd love to shovel rock, and soaking a pick into a bank of conglomerate would thrill me with joy. I'm real fond of any hard work, but the trouble is that I get lonesome and have to come into town and mingle with my fellow man. I ain't opposed to exerting myself, Mr. Stegg; it's just that I'm of a sociable disposition. You ain't got no idea how I'm enjoying this here little talk with you and how I hate to tear myself away, which I've got to do, nor how grateful and thankful I am to you for your advice, which I aim to study over and profit by. Fare thee well,' he says, 'and if forever, then may blessings light on your old bald head and your feet never get tangled in your whiskers!'

"With that he threw his leg back over his saddle and hit the breeze, and I murmured a few words of direction to my bulls and wended my way, fearing that I'd slopped a heap of wisdom on thorny ground.

"In a way I had, but just the same, Simmy quit mavericking and sold them prolific cows of his and got him a steady job. I don't take no credit for that though, my opinion being that the chances of a stock-association detective coming up over the rise and getting the drop on him whilst he was putting his S B bar on the offspring of a W. G. cow was all that made Simmy rustle. I allow that he told the truth when he said he got lonesome out on the

range. Anyway he went to work at a steady job — night shift on Mike Kinahan's gold mine, which was the only faro layout in town; and there ain't no doubt but he was happy and contented in that line of endeavor. He could mingle with his fellow man all he'd a mind to at Mike's and though faro never did seem to me no financial risk to the dealer there was always a chance of excitement with some habitual homicide that was bucking the game.

"There was other games too round town, and Simmy would naturally take a whirl at them when he was off shift, so that he didn't lay up no money like I advised him to do. But he was happy and contented — until he took one chance too many at the church social and thereby got acquainted with the lady that he's now boarding with.

"Her name at that time was Lucia McArdle and she come from some center of population in Iowa to visit with her sister, Joe Peabody's wife, and liking the climate concluded to stay and open up a milliner store, which she done. She was getting along in years, for an unmarried lady — all of twenty, I reckon — and when she passed through a doorway you felt like hollering to her to duck her head. On the other hand the door wouldn't have had to be more'n ajar to let her through easy. You wouldn't have called her homely, because her eyes was a nice blue and her teeth was white and even, and she had a plenty of hair, and when she did smile it made her look all the better, account of the plumb serious way she had her mouth set the most of the time. Life was real and life was earnest to Lucia, and you wouldn't hardly have thought that she'd have took up hats and bonnets for her life work, only I judge even the

Methodist ladies couldn't very well go to church without 'em; and looking at it in that light Lucia may have allowed it was her duty. She was certainly one of the most real, earnest, little church workers that the Reverend Winship had, and when they got up this here social she was among them present, though she had her doubts about it being quite proper.

"The idea was that the church ladies made them each one a necktie and a kind of a rosette out of the same pattern stuff, each lady a different pattern. Also they each fixed up one lunch for two and fixed themselves up, after which they went over over to the Reverend Winship's house and let down the bars to admit the eager rush of the male population of the town. You, being a male and being jabbed in the small of the back by the lunkhead right behind you, smiled sort of like a Halloween pumpkin at Mrs. Henry Prothero, who gave you welcome and took the four bits that you dug up after you'd been reminded of it and made to break out into a profuse perspiration. Then you forced your poor tottering legs over to Mrs. Jim Williams, who held a bag that had the neckties in, unsight unseen, and you grabbed your tie and was steered into the setting room, with the warm rich blood mounting to your manly ears and your grin set hard by this time and making your face ache. Through the glaze in your eyes you seen the room was full of beauteous females, all ages and sizes and all styles of beauty, from the inward beauty of the soul and mind to the kind that ain't only skin deep and don't seem to need to be no deeper. All of them ladies wore rosettes, and the rules of the game was that you claimed the lady that wore the rosette that matched the tie that you'd drawed

out of the bag, and later on you and her together et the lunch that she'd put up.

"It's getting to be now so's there ain't the good feeling and mutual forbearance between the preachers and the saloon men that there was at that time — not so much of the live-and-let-live spirit. I doubt if any saloon man or gambler in good standing would patronize a church social in this day and age, let alone closing up the bar and the games for a couple of hours or so to boost the thing along. But it was different then. Mike Kinahan never held it against a man because he was religious and had associations with deacons and elders and such. 'Get right down to it, and there's always some bad in a man,' Mike would say. 'He may not act it, and you might think he was totally lost to all sense of indecency and iniquity, but deep down in him, hid away somewheres in the ashes of his moral nature, there's some spark of bad that deacons and elders ain't never squenched; so why shun him and put the right hand of brotherhood behind our backs when he holds hisn out?'

"Holding them liberal views Mike chased the crowd out of the Eagle Bird, locked the safe and the front door and went over to the sociable with Simmy Broderick. Simmy was kind of curious to see what he'd draw out of the bag. Up to that time his luck hadn't been good, but he figured that you never can tell and he might break even on the lunch even if the lady was a dead card. The lady he drawed was Lucia McArdle.

"It was the first time that he'd seen her or she'd seen him, and right away he knew that a guiding Providence had slid that necktie of hers into his hand. He told her

so about the first rattle out of the box, and she didn't seem to think that there was anything out of the way about it. 'We're led in all things, Mr. Broderick,' she says.

"'I reckon that's right, Miss McArdle, ma'am,' says Sim; 'when we ain't drove or just a-drifting. As to leading, you'd sure find me easy to halter-break if you took a notion you was anyways so inclined. Yes, ma'am!'

"'I don't think that I quite understand,' she says, her blue eyes wide open on him.

"'I mean speaking parabolically, that I'd be bridle wise and willing' says Simmy. 'I wouldn't never balk on you nor yet kick over the traces. I'd stand without tying, ma'am, but all the same I'd sooner be tied.'

"She shook her head, sort of sad. 'No,' she says. 'It sounds like it ought to be plain, but I'm afraid I'm real dumb. Seems like the folks out here don't talk like they do back in Iowa. You're a cowboy, ain't you, Mr. Broderick?'

"'I was, but I seen the error of my ways, and I'm connected with a bank now,' says Sim.

"'I didn't know that there was a bank here,' she says.

"'Yes, ma'am,' says Sim as solemn as she was. 'And a wheel,' he says.

"'A wheel!'

"'Yes, ma'am. Draw, stud and straight, of course, and any other means of getting action, from beggar-my-neighbor to baccarat, all strictly on the level.'

"Lucia smiled for the first time. 'It's no use,' she says. 'I guess I'm just dumb.'

"'Hearts would be your game,' says Sim, looking at her,

admiring. 'I don't know though. If I had a fistful I'd unload 'em all on you. As it is, you've got the onliest one I had.'

"'Oh dear, oh dear!' says Lucia. 'Couldn't you please talk so I can understand you, Mr. Broderick?'

"Mr. Broderick dropped his voice, so I couldn't hear what he said, but I reckon he made himself part understood, because I seen Lucia blush four or five times at intervals and smile at him twice while they was eating their lunch together. Later on she went home with Joe Peabody and his wife, and I was walking right behind them and heard them a-talking about Simmy. Lucia said she thought he was a right nice gentleman, but he talked awful funny and he didn't look a mite like a banker. Joe Peabody said no he didn't, and he didn't look nothing like a emperor of China either, and Lucia says why should he, and Joe says that's right, why should he; and then after a while I heard Lucia say that she didn't believe a word of it, because if he was anything like that he wouldn't have been let to come in amongst respectable people, and anyway she'd promised to go buggy-riding with him and she wasn't going to break no promises. They turned the corner just then and I didn't hear what Joe said, but they hadn't got far when I heard him laughing like a hyena.

"I went on to the Eagle Bird to get something for the nerve strain I'd been suffering from, owing to me having got a necktie that was made by a lady who had lost her husband a few years back and didn't think she'd ever get used to not having a man around the house. Having got about three fingers of relief I went over to the faro table

and sat down, and pretty soon Simmy come in and we got to talking about church socials. I allowed that they was a low form of recreation, with all the dangers to an unmarried man that there was at a dance and none of the fun.

"'Well, Mr. Stegg, sir,' says Simmy, 'with the greatest respect for you and not meaning no references to allusions, I don't think that nobody but an old doddering, brindle-whiskered moral blight would hold such views as them. I ain't opposed to dances,' he says, 'but dances don't run you up against noble, high-minded ladies with refined ideas and improving conversation, so far as my experience goes. Dances is all right for the heedless and unthinking, but I never yet come away from one filled plumb up with lofty thoughts and realizing my own orneriness the way I done to-night.'

"'Mebbe that's so,' I says. 'Was it Miss McArdle filled you with them altitudinous reflections? From where I was a-setting I judged it was coconut layer cake that she was instilling into you.'

"'It was good cake too,' says Simmy; 'and she made it herself. Say, ain't it wonderful how innocent and kind-hearted and sweet-souled and pure and lovely and moral-principled a woman can be!'

"'It does beat hell,' I says.

"'When you meet up with a lady like that you just naturally feel like dirt,' says Simmy. 'If I wasn't just dirt and unworthy of such, that's the kind I'd want — a lady I could look up to.'

"'You would sure have to look up to Miss McArdle, Simmy,' I says, 'unless you stood on a chair.'

"'I ain't got no use for these here sawed-off, dumpy women,' he says.

"'I never knew a runt that had,' I told him; and just then one of the nerve cases at the bar recovered enough to break away and come over to get a little action, and Simmy had to take up his professional duties.

"The next day at twelve-fifty-five P.M. in the afternoon a shiny buggy with rubber-tire wheels rolled out of Ed. Bell's livery behind Ed's match team of bays that he never hitched up for less than a ten-dollar note. Driving them bays was a small-sized freckled young man wearing a new twenty-dollar cream-colored hat, a black-and-white check suit of clothes that Jake Grosenbeck had been holding at sixty-five, a red silk necktie with green bars that never cost less than two, retail, and smoked buck gloves with yellow curlicues stitched on the ga'ntlets that must have brought the total cost of the visible outfit to a hundred dollars or a dollar or two apast. At one P.M., Rocky Mountain time, to the dot the bays stopped and danced in front of Joe Peabody's house, at which the door opened and Lucia McArdle come out dressed in clothes and a hat. Three or four minutes later you couldn't see nothing but a cloud of dust and you couldn't hear nothing around town but remarks.

"A little before supper time the buggy and its contents got back and Simmy got out and helped Lucia out.

"'It was a real lovely ride,' says Lucia, just as she might have said that it was a real improving sermon. Then she said: 'I hope you ain't offended by anything I said, Mr. Broderick. I kind of felt it was my duty. It's because

gambling of any kind is sinful. And it ain't respectable either.'

"'I don't blame you, and you sure couldn't say anything that would offend me, ma'am,' says Sim; 'and I thank you for the honor and the pleasure of your company, which I have sure enjoyed.'

"'Don't name it,' she says. 'Won't you come in?'

"'Sure he will!' Mrs. Peabody calls out of the window. 'Sim, you hustle that rig over to the barn and come back to supper. We'll wait for you — like one hog waits for another, mebbe, if you don't hurry.'

"'I reckon you'll have to excuse me, Mis' Peabody,' says Sim, climbing into the buggy. 'I've got some business to 'tend to, thank you just as much, ma'am. I'll sure have to be excused to-night.'

"He shook the lines and drove off, and you never seen a boy with a new suit of clothes and a red necktie that looked less like he'd just had a real lovely ride. He straightened up some as he drove through Main Street, and he joshed back at Ed about the way you'd expect; but as soon as he walked into Mike's place Mike knew that something was wrong, and Simmy didn't keep him in no agony of suspense.

"'Mike, I'm a-going to quit you cold,' says he. 'It ain't that our relations hasn't been of the pleasantest kind or that the emollients and perquisites ain't satisfactory. I ain't got no kick coming whatever. But on moral grounds my conscience won't allow me to skin my fellow man for a living no longer — not in no such crude and apparent way as gambling. Whatever sucker money I accumulate in future has got to come through respectable channels such

as is approved and sanctioned by the better element of society and hasn't got no risk.'

"Mike looked at him awhile, trying to study out just what he meant, then he reached back of him and took down a bottle. 'I'll go up to your room with you and help you to bed, Simmy,' he says. 'You've got a touch of mountain fever. It ain't nothing serious, but you mustn't talk no more. A good drench of this here in scalding water with half a teaspoonful of cayenne will fix you up in good shape.'

"'I ain't delirious,' says Simmy. 'I'm quitting you — quitting gambling.'

"'I'll bet you a hundred dollars to five that you ain't,' says Mike; and the words wasn't out of his mouth before Simmy had jerked his roll.

"'Put up your money,' says Simmy. 'Mr. Stegg here will hold the stakes.'

"It just goes to show!" moralized the old bullwhacker. "A man with slathers of experience and more wisdom than you can shake a stick at can reason with a boy day in and day out and year after year until he's blue in the face, using all kinds of logic and eloquence and horse sense — and all the good it does is scorn and derision. Then along comes some fool female without experience or judgment or even age — nothing between her ears of a solid nature but hairpins and bony structure — and the first thing you know, Mister Boy is breaking his neck to follow her instructions as to rules of conduct.

"That was the way with Simmy. Ten minutes after Lucia had told him that gambling was sinful he throws up

a lucrative position with a brilliant career ahead of him and mebbe a first-class dive of his own, with no idea of what he was a-going to do next. He had made a killing on his own account only the night before the social that helped some — playing Walt Hathaway's wheel on the way to Mike's. Walt's wheel was as crooked as a corkscrew and Simmy knew it; but he took a chance, as usual, and Walt got so excited at the gold pieces that Simmy strung along that his foot slipped on the brake and let the little ball into one of Simmy's numbers that had a double eagle on it. Besides that he had what was coming to him from Mike Kinahan, and all told he must have had close on to eight hundred dollars after he'd bought the check suit and fixings; so he could afford to loaf awhile. The trouble was that Lucia didn't consider that loafing was respectable. There wasn't no suiting that girl.

"About a week after Simmy had reformed, as he put it, he was explaining to Sam Lafleiche and me about how he was aching to find a good job. Sam was chairman of the county central committee then and a good friend of Simmy's and a good friend of mine and everybody else's, especially around about time for the primaries. I'd just been telling him about the winning that Simmy made and what a good thing it was that he quit gambling right away after he'd cashed in.

"'What's the matter with going back to cow-punching?' I asks Sim.

"'Well sir,' says Sim, 'one difficulty about that is that they ain't hiring no extra hands after the fall round-ups. Watts let out three of the boys yesterday, and the W. G. ain't keeping but half a dozen and the cook, and Red Barlow

aims to set them to getting cedar posts out of the gulches through the winter to keep up their circulation and keep down expenses. Another thing, if I did get a job on a ranch I'd be sort of expected to put in most of my time there, and I've got my reasons for wanting to stay around town most of my time. I was figuring on starting some kind of business, but most every business is already engaged in more than's necessary; and then I ain't got no business ability. What I want is something that don't call for no kind of ability whatsoever and no kind of exertion to speak of, and ain't out of town, and pays good, and has a future.'

"'I reckon I know the answer to that,' says Sam with his wolf grin. 'What you're talking about is a county office. How would county clerk suit you?'

"That was how come Simmy got to be county clerk and register of deeds and member of the Board of Equalization. He didn't have no trouble getting elected, being popular and genial and willing to put up for the campaign expenses, and having the right ideas on equalizing the cow outfits' taxes when they was assessed too high. It certainly looked like what he'd been looking for. Not that the county-clerk salary amounted to much, but there was the recording fees as register that he got for all the warranty deeds and mortgages and quit claims, and a boom in real estate expected along in the spring. And the best of it was that Lucia was tickled to death.

"Mrs. Peabody told her that she couldn't see why. 'I thought you said that you wouldn't have nothing to do with him unless he worked at something respectable,' she says.

"'Ain't being a statesman respectable?' says Lucia.

'Was George Washington and Henry Clay and Daniel Webster and Abe Lincoln looked down on because they was in politics? Seems to me you ain't reasonable, sister. Mr. Broderick expects to go to the legislature next general election, and from that it ain't but a step to the Senate of the United States. Ain't that respectable?'

"'There's a difference of opinion about that,' says sister. 'I don't think a senator has got any the edge over a square, honest, hard-working gambler; but then, it's been twelve years since I lived in Iowa. I presume likely you'll give up your milliner business now?'

"'Not until we're married,' says Lucia, blushing. 'Mr. Broderick's wishes is to wait until his — until he's raked in enough chips to stack up alongside what I've got,' she says, giggling. 'He don't want to take no chances, and I respect him for it. But ain't he got the funniest way of talking!'

"There ain't nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream," quoted the old bullwhacker. "The trouble is that once in a while the cover gets kicked off and we wake up with our toes frostbit. For a while Simmy went around with a smile on his face and a song in his heart. He had ordered a set of books for the county that had deeds and mortgages and such already printed in 'em, so's he didn't have to do much writing, only to fill in the blanks, and he hired Billy Dickinson to do that for him. Billy was an old sourdough that used to work in the Homestake office for Haggin, before his inebriousness got away with him, and then he went to prospecting, and finally drifted into Hermosilla and accepted a position washing dishes in Jim

Berry's café, which he was working at when Simmy made him his deputy.

"Billy was no ornament, but he certainly could write an elegant hand, and when it come to figuring up the tax list he was old first-premium curly cauliflower; and he wasn't expensive, considering. Consequently Simmy had all the time he needed to draw his salary and collect his fees, besides driving Lucia around behind Ed Bell's bays and taking her to oyster suppers and hard-times parties and sheet-and-pillow-case festivals and such other doings as was got up by the Ladies' Aid and the Dorcas. The fees come in tolerable good at first, being it was a long hard winter and chattel mortgages frequent; but along come spring they begun to drop off, and instead of the real-estate boom that was expected and relied on there was a new railroad survey made, running outside of the county line and into Pennington. Three town sites was platted along that line inside of as many weeks, but that didn't do Simmy no good, and the boy's lip begun to drag when there wasn't nobody looking. Finally it got so bad that he let out a squeal.

"'I ain't going to get my seed back at this rate,' he says to Billy one morning. 'County warrants has gone down to sixty. The sheriff's the only one of the boys who's making anything.'

"'Yeah,' says Billy.

"'There ain't a leaf quivering or a sail in sight,' says Simmy. 'The autopsy has been held on Hope and the burial services is now taking place with me as chief mourner. I hear the knell a-knelling slow and solemn.'

"'That's Berry's cow a-browsing round amongst the sunflowers,' says Billy. 'That cow's got sense. She ain't

bawling about feed not being brought to her, she's rustling; and that's the difference between her and you.'

"'As how?' asks Simmy.

"Billy got up and took him by the arm and led him outside and swept his hand at the surrounding country. 'Tell me what you see away off yonder,' he says.

"'Scenery,' says Simmy. 'It's considerable inspiring, but not particular nourishing.'

"'It depends on how you look at it,' says Billy. 'The way I look at it ain't as scenery, but as territory to be took up and staked off according to the following metes and bounds, to wit, and to be filed in the office of the register of deeds in and for Minnekahta County at two dollars per file by frenzied seekers after mammon; that's the way I look at it. My eyes go below surface indications and down to bedrock, and somewheres between I see location notices.'

"'You've got a pair of right optimistic optics, Uncle Billy,' says Sim. 'You ought to know that we ain't in the mineral belt though.'

"'What's the matter with letting that belt out a few holes?' says Billy. 'Anyway, you rustle me a pack horse, a fry pan, a pick and shovel and give me a week's leave of absence. It won't hurt nothing, even if it don't help, in which case you can extend the leave indefinite and I'll keep on a-going and let the outfit be a stand-off to what wages should ought to be a-coming to me if matters and things was otherwise. I reckon I'll cruise around some, whether or no.'

"'I'm right sorry to lose you, Uncle Billy,' says Simmy, 'but I reckon it ain't fair to hold you. I'll let you have my bed roll and I guess I can get that little old pinto pony from

Ed Bell to pack. Also you're kindly welcome to this seven dollars and a half that I've got left. I won't need it after I've hung myself.'

"Billy told him not to talk foolish and tried to cheer him up, but he didn't have no good success. Simmy just hunched over like he'd done after he come back from that first buggy ride with Lucia, and went over to Ed Bell's and traded him his pearl-handled gun for the pinto pony. The next morning Billy lit out bright and early, and Simmy had to stay in the office all day. After supper he slicked up and went over to Joe Peabody's, according to custom, and Joe and his wife went out on the porch and let him and Lucia have the setting room as usual — with the door open and the window shades up and the lamp turned up as high as it would go without smoking, according to Lucia's notion of what was proper and becoming.

"'You ain't like yourself this evening, Mr. Broderick,' says Lucia after a while, 'ain't you well?'

"'Excepting for a headache, which I think is caused by the glare of the light in my eyes, I'm tolerable middling, thank you, ma'am,' says Simmy. 'I don't know but the draft from that door may have something to do with it too,' he says; 'and the chill that I always get when you call me "Mr. Broderick."'

"'Simeon, then,' says Lucia, relenting some. 'Ain't you reely well, Simeon; or are you just a-making sport? I can't never tell, you're so funny.'

"'Whatever I am, I ain't feeling funny this evening,' says Sim. 'With ruin a-staring me in the face and hope of ever being united to the best and loveliest of her sex dashed and double-dashed and exclamation-pointed, my

spirits is certainly a considerable depressed. It's this-a-way, Lucia, honey.'

"He went on to tell her the way it was, and she seemed a considerable sorry for him. 'All we can do is wait and be patient though,' she says. 'It ain't like we wasn't both young and couldn't afford to. Ain't there some way ——' She leaned her chin on her hands and studied.

"'Sure there's a way,' says Simmy, breaking in on her meditations. 'If you would slack up a little on them notions you've got about games of chance and skill, sweetness — which notions is certainly right and noble and magnanimous, if you look at it strict and rigid — if, sort of temporary, you could wink them lovely eyes of yourn a spell, why, I've got a daisy hunch that I'd be in elegant shape financially before daylight to-morrow morning. You're too angel-minded and spotless to know what a real hunch is, darling; but I want to say that the kind I've got, it's a sin and a economic waste not to play it to the limit. I've got that seven-fifty that Billy wouldn't take yet, and if you'd try to look at it in the light of an investment — a conservative investment ——'

"'Simeon Broderick,' says Lucia, 'are you talking about gambling after all I've said about it? If I thought you was, and was in earnest, I'd tear your image from my heart and not have nothing more to do with you. If you ain't got no more respect for me and no more aspirations to being well thought of than that, I'm real disappointed in you, that's all. I did think that you had saw the light.'

"'Sho! I was only fooling,' Simmy told her. 'I reckon it's the way you said — you can't tell it on me when I'm indulging in jocoseness,' he says. 'Why, I wouldn't gamble

— excepting a Dorcas grab bag or chances on a crazy quilt — not for anything you could mention. No, ma'am, sweetheart! I'll tell you — after this I'll hold up my two fingers crossed when I'm talking playful, and then you won't hurt my feelings by misunderstanding me.'

"'Well,' says Lucia, 'I'm mighty glad that you don't really mean it. I didn't hardly think you could. What I was a-thinking, Simeon, was that I've got nearly a thousand dollars laid up, and you could take up a homestead on Wickiup, and — and ——'

"'Not on your sweet, dear, beautiful, blameless life!' says Simmy firmly. 'I ain't starting no ranch on my girl's money — and my fingers ain't crossed on that. I'd as soon marry a Rosebud squaw for the government rations. That's me. I wouldn't do that no more'n I'd gamble; and anyway ranching is the worst kind of gambling. First off you bet Uncle Sam eighteen dollars against a hundred and sixty acres that you'll stay five years; and then you gamble your seed against the crops and take a chance on hail and another chance on drouth — which is odds of forty to one anywhere in the Hills — and if you win it's a life sentence with nothing off for good behavior. No, ma'am, ranching is too speculative for one thing; and for another, nobody ain't going to be able to say that Simmy Broderick got his start by marrying riches. We done settled that, honey.'

"Lucia blushed. 'I know we did,' she says. 'I just thought we — mebbe we might —— What are you doing to that lamp, Simeon?'

"'Shucks! Now I've turned it out,' says Simmy.

"Owing to him not having no matches and not liking to

trouble Mrs. Peabody and Joe for quite a while Simmy went home that night some comforted. It didn't last long though, and for the next few days he was plumb unhappy. It was lonesome around the office without Billy to talk to and nothing to do but roll cigarettes and wonder how he was a-going to amass a thousand dollars to lay alongside Lucia's thousand. He was set in his mind that there wouldn't be no nuptials until he was able to see that thousand and mebbe raise it. He had too much self-respect. The only way out of it he could figure was to hold up the stage the next bullion shipment, and he had his doubts whether Lucia would approve of that, though she hadn't never declared herself. The probabilities was that she wouldn't think it respectable, and he aimed to be respectable and do right. Seemed like Iowa had him foul.

"When it got so that his thoughts was too tumultuous he'd stick a notice on the office door and go around to Mike's place and look on. That wasn't nothing more than an aggravation though. He'd see some lucky fool win big on a bobtail flush and think that if it wasn't for Iowa he might just as well have done that himself; or he'd notice wrong discards or calls that ought to have been judicious raises or winning hands laid down, and he'd know just how he would have played them hands to scoop up every dollar in sight. He'd stand for an hour at a time by the roulette table, and when the little ball started a-rolling he'd make believe in his mind that he was placing his chips; and the sums that he won, in his mind, that-away wasn't nothing short of fabulous.

"Then he'd tear himself away and walk down the street to Lucia's millinery and look at the hats in the windows

until Lucia shook her head at him, disapproving, and then he'd drag himself back to the office and smoke more cigarettes and wonder if drowning was as easy and painless as it was cracked up to be, and whether Lucia would be faithful to his memory.

"He was studying on that, about the fifth day of his misery, when the door opened and a colored person edged in and asked him how was tricks. Leastaways he thought it was a colored person before he heard him speak, but having visions of Lucia weeping o'er his lonely grave his own eyes was misted up and he didn't reco'nize Billy.

"'How's tricks?' asks Billy again.

"'Well, well!' says Simmy, forcing a grin. 'Joined the Senegambian Serenaders, have you? Sit down, Br'er Dickinson, sah, and bring yo' corporosity to a equilibrium while I requisate yo' conundrum, sah. Well, how *is* tricks, Mistah Dickinson, sah? You tell me.'

"Billy sat down, and looking very steady and very sober at Simmy he pulled a couple of papers out of his pocket that was all grimed up with black, like he was. 'I want these here documents filed the first thing,' he says. 'They're location notices on one certain tract or parcel of land, lying and being as hereinafter described and containing carboniferous deposits of coal, similar to what I've got on my face and clothes. Struck it in a gulch about three miles west of Beecher Buttes. Simmy, we're rich.'

"'Coal, eh?' says Simmy, kind of disappointed. 'That's the best you could do?'

"'I reckon it is,' says Billy. 'Of course it ain't much to find within the borders of this county resources of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice; something that's going to

attract capital like flies to the molasses on a baby's mouth, bring emigration that would stagger Castle Garden, turn the humming wheels of industry and locomotives throughout the len'th and breadth of our fair land and run ferry boats and ocean liners o'er the bright blue wave from pole to pole. That ain't nothing. It's just the best I could do, like you said. All the same I'd just merely snicker if anybody offered me a million dollars for that claim of mine right now; and the one I staked for you is just as good.'

"'I'd snicker if anybody offered me a million,' says Simmy. 'Snickering wouldn't hardly express my joyful emotions. Don't look at me that wild-eyed way, Uncle Billy. It makes me nervous. The question to me is: Can we get anybody else to stake claims, do you reckon?'

"Billy got up like he'd been stung. 'My gracious goodness and three hands around!' he says. 'Here I give this impecuniary pollywog the Philadelphia Mint and the United States Treasury and all he can talk about is two-dollar recording fees! Listen, you bat-eyed, under-sized, short-weight tomtit: Do you understand I've took a sack of that coal over to Bob Milligan and he's tried it out in his forge and he says it's the best all-round coal and gives the dandiest welding heat of any coal he ever seen or heard tell of — no slag and a fine ash and we've got enough of it to stoke hell for a thousand years?

"'Listen: Six months after I take the public into my confidence there's going to be hoists and culm heaps and coke ovens and breakers and sidetracks and main lines and miners' shacks and black smoke from the Beecher Buttes to Blueblanket. I'm telling you!'

"'Good!' says Simmy, brightening up. 'You talk like

that when you take the public into your confidence and I don't know but we can get a little remunerative employment in this office after all. But don't let me keep you from getting confidential right away, Uncle Billy — and don't wash your face; leave it the way it is — and if — I mean I'll split the recording fees with you, Uncle Billy.'

"Billy said a few things that had a good welding heat to them and went back to Bob Milligan's blacksmith shop. Simmy put the two location notices on record, just to pass time, and after a while he went to lunch. Ed Bell was the only man at the table at Berry's and he told Simmy that he'd let out six saddle horses and four rigs to a lot of crazy jakes who was going out to the coal fields that Billy Dickinson had discovered out Blueblanket way, and Billy had collected a five-dollar bill from each one of them for locating them.'

"'I guess Billy aint no crazy jake,' says Simmy.

"Well, the Beecher coal boom started that-away. It wasn't no frenzied rush, but there was twenty-six location notices filed the next day, and from that on business in the register's office was just about tolerable lively. Simmy's hair come out slick again, and every week he counted up the receipts he felt himself getting about a hundred dollars nearer to Lucia. Lucia was mighty pleased to find that Providence was justifying her good opinion of it too; also that Simmy was acquiring habits of industry, owing to him not being able to coax Billy Dickinson back into the office, even for half the fees. Billy was over at his claim most all the time, doing development work and keeping an eye on the distant horizon for Eastern capital. He had come

down on his price to half a million and a royalty, in the second month, but that didn't signify that he wasn't plumb full of faith. He just didn't want to hog everything. He tried to get Simmy to do some work on the claim that he had staked for him, but Simmy didn't seem to be interested. 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' he says. 'Little by little makes a lot; a good thing and a sure thing is two things. Anyway there's no rush about the claim; it won't run away.'

"'It might be jumped,' Billy told him. 'Don't never put off till to-morrow what you can do to-day; safe bind, safe find; if all your eggs is in one basket you can't have too many irons in the fire, the way I look at it; but you do what you feel like, only don't say I didn't tell you.'

"Simmy told Lucia what Billy had said that night. 'I s'pose I might hire a man to go out there and do enough work to hold it,' he says.

"Lucia asked him how much it would cost, and he told her about a hundred dollars. 'It looks like gambling a hundred dollars,' he says. And Simmy told her that was the reason he hadn't done it. It looked that way to him. 'Poor old Billy!' he says. 'He will take chances. If he'd had a good, Iowa-raised, moral-minded girl to keep him out of the path of destruction when he was younger he might have amounted to something. It sure makes me shudder when I look at him and think what I'd have been if you hadn't have took a hold on me.'

"'It makes me glad and thankful,' says Lucia. 'Just see how lovely it's all a-coming out! I knew it would.'

"'So did I,' says Simmy. 'I'd have bet my last dollar on it. I've been talking to Lafleiche and it looks like it was

a cinch that I get the nomination for the legislature. It's going to cost a little money, but I'll be able to make the riffle before the time comes to put up.'

"It wouldn't have been no trouble at all for him to have reached out and knocked on wood, but Lucia's eyes was a-shining so's he couldn't think of nothing else just then; and, just as you might expect, business begun to fall off right from that date. Days went by, and not a location notice filed; then come a little spurt of quit claims, and then they pinched out.

"One morning Simmy was in O. P. Ferguson's store, he heard O. P. turn down a fellow who wanted to trade a good coal claim for a small bill of groceries and it wasn't long after that that Billy Dickinson come into town with a pack on the little pinto and allowed that he was on his way to the northern Hills to work a placer that he'd passed up about five years back.

"'I've got my choice between the gold pan and the dish-pan,' he told Simmy. 'One thing about placer, if you get anything you get something, and you get it without the aid or consent of Eastern capital and railroads. I never did take no stock in coal. I just discovered it to show I could if I wanted to, but it ain't no occupation for a white man. What do we want with coal anyway, when we've got good pitch pine? Well, Simmy, you loan me twenty-five dollars and I'll forgive you for talking me into all this foolishness and be hitting the trail.'

"Simmy tried to get him to take the half of the location fees, but Billy wouldn't hear to it. All he wanted was twenty-five dollars, and when Simmy gave it to him he lit out. Seems like I heard of him making a strike in Cœur

d'Alene a year or two after that, but it may have been some other Billy Dickinson. Anyway he went, and Simmy knew that when he gave up there wasn't no foundations solid enough to build air castles on.

"About a week after that a Deadwood sport, name of Reed Snumshaw, strayed into Mike Kinahan's place, and when he come out he had Mike's bank roll and a bill of sale for tables and bar fixtures. Simmy felt real sorry for Mike, but, as he told Lucia, it went to show what a young, ambitious, nervy man could do in a few short hours, without friends or influence or money more'n enough to buy a stack of whites. 'I ain't defending this Snumshaw,' he says. 'There ain't no denying but he took hazardous risks, which is immoral, like you say. But just see what he done! He told me that he had a hunch he'd win, but I bet it wasn't no such a hunch as I had that time —— Well, there ain't no use talking about it,' he says, sighing; 'but it sure looks like I won't be among them present when the next legislature convenes and assembles at Bismarck.'

"'Simeon,' says Lucia, 'I can't help thinking that down in your secret heart you've got hankerings for gains got by hazardous risks instead of honest toil and saving and a safe five per cent interest. Now if you want me to keep right on loving you you've got to promise me faithful that you won't never gamble none whatsoever.'

"Simmy promised faithful, and while it was fresh on him a little dried-up, curly-black-whiskered, bandy-legged man with coal dust on his neck come into the office and introduced himself as Mr. Griffith ap Morgan ap Jones.

"'Commonly known as "Aps,"' says the little man. 'I'm a darling and a daisy and a killaloo bird,' he says,

mighty boastful. 'Luck's my pup and follows me around,' he says. 'Any man that does me a favor wears diamonds in the near future, and the man that bucks my game is a prey to bitter and unavailing regrets shortly subsequent. I'm cold pizen with no anecdote, or I'm milk and honey blest — according as you want to take me. I've jumped your coal claim and I propose to work it, and I'd like to have you file the relocation. Short and sweet, that's me.'

"'You're kindly welcome, Mr. Aps,' says Simmy. 'The favor's all the other way, and the recording fee is two dollars, cash money, payable in advance. I'll be glad to make you out a quit claim to make you feel quite safe, if you want to pay the fees for that too, which is two for the documents and two for recording — six dollars in all —— cash.'

"'That's the point,' says Aps. 'At the present time I happen to be broke. Now just because I like your looks and because you take your loss like a sport, I'm going to give you a half interest in that claim and to all revenues accruing, which will be princely. All I ask of you is to record your deed and relocation and give me an order on the store for what I need to start on. I reckon ten dollars' worth would cover the ground. Don't thank me; you're a man it's a pleasure to obligate.'

"'Mr. Aps, I sure appreciate your generosity,' says Simmy. 'I just naturally can't help thanking you, but just the same I ain't going to take advantage of your kindness. All you need to do is to dig up them fees, or fee, and keep your revenues for your own exclusive use and behoof. No more, and no less. As Mr. Macbeth says, there ain't no speculation in my eyes.'

"'You don't understand,' says Aps. 'Coal mining is my

strong suit. I was raised to it. I know coal with my eyes shut and my hands tied. I've et coal and drunk coal and slept on coal and wore underwear made out of coal sacks for thirty years. That claim of mine, which was yours, has got a seventeen-foot vein and a sandstone roof, and not a smither of slate or bone in it. The worst I know of it is a three-inch streak of clay, and that's nothing at all. Do you know what all that means? Speculation! I'd be ashamed to talk that way! Don't tell me that you're a cheap skate and that you pass up a gilt-edge proposition like I'm making you. Don't tell me that you are a pussylanimous peanut and——'

"'I won't,' says Simmy; 'and as a friendly well-wisher I wouldn't advise you to, either. I'm a level-headed, cool-judgmented believer in the bird in the hand. I like to hear them warbling in the bush, but I don't lavish no money on salt to sprinkle their little tail feathers. Also I'm long-suffering — but no longer than is reasonable; and I feel you are wasting valuable time here, Mr. Aps, sir.'

"'I ain't in no rush,' says Aps.

"'I was talking about my time,' says Simmy. 'Would you be so obliging and accommodating as to close the door behind you as you go out?'

"Aps closed the door as requested, but he opened it again and shoved in his head.

"'Don't you never tell me that you're a sport,' he says, and then disappears.

"Simmy picked up a paperweight and held it ready for a minute or two; then he laid it down again and groaned. 'No, I ain't no sport,' he says. 'I ain't no sport. I'm what he said.

"'And I bet the bow-legged little cuss knows what he's talking about,' he says. 'No, I won't bet, but — I've got a hunch that Uncle Billy got cold feet too soon.'

"Along late in the afternoon he was still a-musing when the door opened and Aps come in again, grinning, and threw down the relocation notice. 'Make out your quit claim and file that there,' he says, and with that he pulls out a roll of bills as big as a bolster and skins off a couple of fives. 'I found a party with real sporting blood,' he says, 'and you've missed your chance.'

"'I'm six dollars ahead of the game, the way I figure it,' says Simmy. 'Thank you, sir. Here's your change, and I'll have both documents ready for you in about an hour if you want to take them with you.'

"'I'll so do,' says Aps. 'I'll go defray some of this money that my half-interest partner has put glad and liberal, and when I'm through I'll be back. You poor, poor sucker!'

"'Shut the door after you, if you'll be so kind and condescending,' says Simmy.

"Aps done so, and then opened it, like before. 'When me and my partner drives apast you in my four-horse barooch, a-spattering mud in your eye, them six dollars will be ashes and wormywood in your mouth,' he says. 'And they told me you was a sport!'

"He was gone before Simmy could grab the paperweight, and he didn't come back until he'd got his trading done and had two or three. Then he offered to shake the dice, first flop, his interest in the mine against Simmy's six dollars. Simmy wouldn't do that, and wouldn't shake when Aps made it ten cents instead of six dollars. Aps said he didn't

hardly think he would, but being a dead-game sport himself he'd give him a last chance. 'I'll shake for anything you say,' he says.

"'You must be subject to chills,' says Simmy. 'Me, I ain't no aspen leaf. I wish, if you ain't got no further business, that you'd conduct that jag of yours outside — and shut the door behind you if you please, sir!'

"'And you call yourself a sport!' says Aps. But he went; and that time he didn't come back.

"'Well,' Simmy says, 'if it wasn't for Lucia, or — or if Lucia wasn't so dad-blamed — so high-minded and uncompromised, bless her sweet innocent soul! Well, she's worth it — or she comes so dog-gone near being worth it that there's no fun in it. I'm sure a lucky boy to have won that trusting little heart, and I'm a low dog if I don't do the way she wants.'

"But he had to relieve his mind by telling Lucia about it.

"'I ain't regretting that I took your advice and let that claim slide,' he says. 'No, sweetheart; I'm glad, for it sure looked like a gamble. But I feel it in my bones that right there I turned my back on the Vanderbilt gang and took the other trail. And I'm rejoiced clear down to my boots that I didn't let myself be led by that Welsh rabbit into a course that would have been against my conscience, but all the same something whispers to me that he's a-going to make the riffle, and some unprincipled person that staked him is a-going to get rich cheap. But I'm glad it wasn't me. Yes, ma'am, girl, if I've got you that's riches more than I'm deserving of.'

"Right there he got the surprise of his life. Lucia

stooped down from her queenly height, and blushing like a suit of winter flannels threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. 'You darling man!' she says. 'Oh, Simmy, I guess it's me that's undeserving!'

"Before Simmy could realize what had happened she made a grab at his hair and wooled it; then she hugged him again and kissed him real energetic. Then, as Simmy showed signs of recovering from the shock and acting up, she broke away and slapped his face.

"'You're forgetting of yourself, Mr. Broderick,' she says.

"'I beg your pardon, Lucia,' says Simmy, took aback considerable; and then he got surprise Number Three, for Lucia started laughing. You've heard of these here peals of merriment. Well, that ain't scarcely describing it, because it was more so. Anyway, it brought her sister a-running, and it was quite a while before she quieted down. A little later on she walked down to the gate with Simmy and told him good night there.

"'You've made me real happy,' she says.

"'I aim to do that right along,' says Simmy.

"'I couldn't help liking you, Simeon,' she proceeds, 'but I had my doubts about you until you told me how noble you acted about that coal mine.'

"'You didn't need to have no doubts,' says he; 'and you don't need to call me Simeon no more. You called me Simmy a while back.'

"'Do you like that better?' she asks softly. 'Well, Simmy dear, I guess you'll do to tie to.'

"After Simmy got home that night and come to himself

a little he wondered how he got there without bumping into something. He was sure in a whirl. Lucia had kissed him and rumpled his hair with her lily fingers just like she wasn't a holy heavenly angel that it took all a man's nerve to be even sort of familiar with! And she had laughed right out, as near like whooping as a lady could! And she had called him Simmy twice, and told him he'd do to tie to. Simmy made up his mind that he would be that kind of a hitching post.

"He sure was! Wrought iron, with a welded ring and anchored in granite four foot below ground. They got to calling him 'Surething Sim' around town, and even that didn't faze him. From not taking chances with his money he got so he didn't take chances on anything else — no more'n he could help. He kept watch of himself all the time, and if he even got to feeling weak-kneed all he had to do was go up to see Lucia, and he'd come back braced up for anything. She was getting quite a lot of Eastern surface rubbed off by that time. She smiled oftener and laughed easier and got a little habit of humming tunes while she worked in her store. From what Joe Peabody and his wife said she wasn't so particular about having the sitting room in a blaze of light when Simmy and her occupied it, and she hardly ever told about how they done back in Iowa.

"Things went along that way until the fall before Simmy's term was up and near time for convention. Then one morning Sam Lafleiche come into the office and talked slate.

"'Sam,' says Simmy, 'I reckon you might as well spit on your sponge and wipe my name off. The legislature is too rich for my blood; likewise running again for county

clerk. It would take all I've got to make the race, and then it's a gamble if I win. My motto is if you've got jack, ten, nine, eight and another jack, hang on to your pair and don't take chances on the draw for the seven-spot or the queen. Not any in mine! I'll stay here until the March winds do blow, do blow, and then retire to private life, thank you kindly.'

"Sam tried to argue him out of it, but he couldn't stir Surething Sim. Even Lucia couldn't. She had kind of set her heart on him going to Bismarck, but of course when he showed her that he'd be risking every last cent on not much more than an even chance she had to give up. Then he explained to her that as the county clerk's office was likewise a gamble he was contemplating buying out Pete Grippen's hardware with what he'd saved, having looked into the same close and careful and figuring that he couldn't lose.

"That was the way it went. He bought Pete out and hired a clerk to help him and put in his time between the store and the office, working like a nailer until March, when he turned over the office to the new register and humped himself in the store exclusive. He'd scarcely got out of the office though when the coal boom started up again and the new register was swamped with relocation notices.

"It certainly did seem sort of aggravating, because this time it looked like lasting. Aps had been working all summer and winter on his claim and he'd got some real coal men interested somehow. Mostly there was rumors and talk at first, but that much seemed sure. Aps himself when he come into town never had much to say, except to Simmy. He'd always make a point of dropping in on Simmy and

asking him if he wasn't about ready to draw straws or pitch at a crack or match pennies or something, and Simmy hated the sight of him, though he never let on that it plagued him. Anyway strangers kept a-coming into town all the time and the relocations was made and work done on the claims. Bell's livery done a land-office business, and Berry's café likewise. Jim had to build an addition to the café to bed down the overflow from the hotel. One day the stage brought in a party that come from Omaha, and two of the members wore white waistcoats and sideburns. It looked good. And it kept right on looking good.

"Well, one day Simmy went into the register's office to look up the standing of a party that he didn't want to take chances on, and he found Sam Lafleiche in there gassing with Johnny Burke, the new register. They both grinned when they seen him, first at him and then at each other. Simmy asked Burke how was tricks and Burke told him that he was just thinking of ordering a new safe to accommodate the specie he was taking in. Sam Lafleiche laughed.

"'Yes,' says he, 'and Simmy didn't see his way clear to risk a hundred dollars' campaign expenses for this office. Sorry now, ain't you, Sim?'

"'Not any,' says Simmy. 'I had one of these booms myself. And then, it helps the hardware business some. Small profits and quick returns suits me. Slow and steady is my motto.'

"'Too bad you ain't more of a sport, though,' says Sam, grinning.

"'Sim likes to play safe,' says Burke, grinning back.

"'And that's true talk too,' says Simmy, chipper and cheerful.

"All the same it got under his skin. His principles was his principles, but he didn't like to be accused of not having horse sense.

"'You had a claim, didn't you?' says Johnny, winking at Sam. 'Quit-claimed it to Aps, didn't you? And wouldn't stake him to a bill of groceries for a half interest?'

"'Sure,' says Simmy. 'Say, you boys are mighty mysterious and mirthful this morning. What's the joke?'

"'Oh, nothing much,' says Johnny. 'Only Aps has quit-claimed too. To a Chicago syndicate. Consideration twenty-three thousand, five hundred dollars and other valuable considerations — which is royalties, Aps says.'

"'Good for him,' says Simmy, calm and pleasant. 'Now let me look at that mortgage record, Johnny. I've got to hurry back to the store.'

"He looked at the record, but he never knew what he was looking at. He shut the book in a minute or two and pushed it back to Burke with a sunny smile. He even rolled a cigarette and passed a remark or two about the weather before he started down the street to the store, and neither Burke nor Lafleiche had any idea that he was put out by the news. But he was. A heap! And when he walked into the store and found Aps a-setting on the counter in a new suit and with his face washed all but the black rims around his eyes, swinging his bandy legs and grinning, he turned sick to the stomach and his knees trembled under him.

"'Here's the old sport!' Aps hollers, kicking up his heels. 'Here's the reckless, roistering gamester! Here's the prodigal, devil-may-care, neck-or-nothing let-'er-go-Gallagher! Have you heard the news?'

"'I have,' says Simmy, 'and them that told me didn't have to yell like a coyote. Making all due allowances, I'll have to ask you to keep that slack mouth of yours about half or three-quarters shut, please, if you'd just as soon. I've got a headache.'

"'It's bile,' says Aps, kicking harder than ever with glee. 'It's bile and gall and bitterness, thinking what you've missed by not having no sporting blood. Honest, ain't you burning and consuming with enviousness and mortifying with melancholious remorse this minute?'

"Simmy turned pale.

"'I'd hate to be afraid to take a chance,' Aps mocks him, shaking his head. 'I feel sorry for you. You'll never get rich like me, with that bump of caution all swelled up. Why ain't you like me? I'll play any man for money, chalk or marbles any time. I'm going to play this here eleven thousand I've got and make it fifty thousand before the week's out.'

"'You'll be busted flat before the night's out,' says Sim.

"'I ain't afraid to take a chance on it, you see,' says Aps. 'I ain't like you. I've been busted flat many's the time, but I never got cold feet in a warm room. Smoke up, Broderick! Let me teach you tiddledywinks. We'll play for matches, the loser to pay for the box. . . . Too risky?'

"Simmy breathed hard and looked at him long. Then all of a sudden he walked to the far end of the store and opened the safe. In a minute or two he come back to where Aps was laughing and slapping his legs, and his hands was full.

"'Here's all the money I've got in the store,' he says, slamming it down on the counter. 'Here's my bank book

in the Rapid National, balanced to yesterday. Here's an inventory of the stock and the lease of the building.' He threw down the papers and unbuttoned his vest. 'And here's my shirt,' he says. 'About the same size as yours. Now you little smutty-nosed, wide-mouthed, four-flushing fag end of nothing, if you want one and all of them possessions, get down off that counter and come over to Reed Snumshaw's and I'll play you anything from freeze-out to fantan till you've got the last of 'em — if you win.'

"Aps hopped down off the counter like it was a hot stove and grinned all over his face. 'I always believed in little men,' he says. 'Let's be going.'

"It was a private and exclusive game that they had — in the back room, with the door shut, and an understanding that it was to be kept shut, except on request. There was quite a few hungry wolves around outside that wanted in, and there was sounds sort of like snarling and indications of teeth before the understanding was arrived at. But the two little men made themselves perfectly clear on the point and the wolves stayed out and only licked their chops when the door opened once in a while to let in the tray and let out a smell of eleven thousand dollars. The wrapper was tore off the first deck a little before five o'clock that afternoon, and at about half-past three in the morning as the gray dawn was a-breaking Mr. Griffith ap Morgan ap Jones was done broke.

"'I've just one regret,' says Aps, a-heaving a sigh. 'I don't care nothing about that hardware store of yours, but I certainly was and am stuck on the pattern of that shirt. And it sure looked like I was a-going to get to wear it,' he says with another sigh.

"'Not to me,' it didn't. Not at no stage of the game,' says Simmy, sort of absent.

"He looked at the order on the express company for the money that Aps had in the safe, turning it over and over and twisting it in his fingers and frowning at it. He picked up another paper, which was what Aps had signed, turning over all royalties in the mine coming to him to S. Broderick. He looked at that quite a spell.

"'I reckon I'm independent rich,' he says. 'I reckon — I reckon I could get married now — if the girl was willing.'

"Aps laughed mighty good-natured for a newly busted man. 'I reckon that's so,' he says. 'But don't it prove that I was right, buddy? You never would have got it if you hadn't been a sport.'

"Simmy studied on that. 'Do you think I'm a sport?' he asks.

"Aps said he did. 'I thought you was, all along,' he says. 'Little men like you and me always is, and that's why I bantered you.'

"Simmy looked him cold and straight in the eye. 'You lunkhead!' he says, slow and impressive. 'You stiff-witted, thick-fingered, fumbling chunk of conceit! You blessed babe in the wood! Why, I never took the half of a chance with you. You're a pudding, Mr. Aps; a mark, a dead open-and-shut cinch. I could have cleaned you out the first half hour if I had wanted to. I've been amusing myself seeing you try to play. When you won it was because I let you; and when I thought you had won long enough I played cards. You gamble? You never gambled in your life, if you only knew it. I was acquainted with the man that took your wad away from you just before you come

into my office the first time, and that man don't much more than know the face cards. Mr. Aps, you may know coal, but when it comes to putty you ain't there. You take my advice and quit games of hazard and chance and get you a good woman to see that you stay quit.'

"With that Simmy picked up the two papers and tore them into little bits and scattered them on the floor. 'This here game's a draw,' he says; and then he smiled and held out his hand.

"Aps made out to shake, and then sat back in his chair and did some meditating. After a little he straightened up and let out a long breath like he'd been pricked with a pin in his self-esteem.

"'Buddy,' he says, 'I ain't a-going to insult you by insisting on you keeping your winnings. I reckon I'm what you say, and the best thing I can do is take my medicine and your advice and thank you kindly.' He laughed and shook Simmy's hand again. Then he says: 'I won't have to ask my partner to give me a job in the mine, that's one thing. I was just a-thinking about bracing her.'

"'Her?' says Simmy.

"'It's a her,' says Aps. 'She didn't want me to give it away while she was staking me, but now that the claim's sold it's got to come out. Yes, it's a lady that's been a-putting up for me. Her name's Miss Lucia McArdle, and she keeps a milliner store here in town. Maybe you know her.'"

The old bullwhacker blew into the reed stem of his corncob pipe and questingly slapped the regions of his pockets and grunted to express disappointment. Upon which the stock tender threw him his own buckskin tobacco sack.

"I thought you said this girl Lucia was set against taking chances?" the stock tender observed.

"She was," replied the old bullwhacker after he had lit up. "She said she was, anyway. Simmy hunted her up the first thing and found she had been hunting him all the night before and was just about crazy. Then Simmy had to tell her where he was and what he had been doing.

"'So you didn't keep what you had won?' she says. 'I'm glad of that, Simmy.'

"'I did kind of intend to at first,' Simmy says, 'but I didn't have no idea that you was gambling right along, after all what you said.'

"'I wasn't,' she says. 'How can you say so, Simmy? It was a business investment; it wasn't like you paying out money on a claim you didn't know nothing about. Uncle Billy didn't know nothing about coal either, but this Mr. Aps did, and he told me it was perfectly safe. And he was right, and I've got over eleven thousand dollars and mebbe a lot of royalties just by advancing seven hundred and fifty-two dollars and twenty-three cents. Don't you see the difference?'

"'I see one thing, girl,' says Simmy: 'I've got to marry you right away to keep you from rash speculating. You're too plumb reckless and you need me to hold you steady and keep you out of investments that holds inducements of more than a safe hundred per cent. Me, I stick to the hardware business,' he says.

"He looked at her mighty serious.

"'I don't know though,' he says, studying. 'They say that marriage is a lottery. Mebbe I hadn't better——'

"Then that long-legged girl's blue eyes begun to dance

and she put her arm around Simmy's neck and her cheek against hisn.

"'Aw, Simmy!' she says. 'Be a sport and take a chance — to please me.'"

V

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF MARY ANN

THERE was company for dinner at the Box Elder stage station. Besides the old bullwhacker, who strayed in from his homestead every so often and sometimes oftener, there were two second-season young things from the Circle Bar outfit who had rounded up the horses that they had been sent after much sooner than they or the foreman could have expected and were in no feverish haste to get back to the ranch and some disagreeable form of toil. The stock tender had baked a large pan of sliced bacon, potatoes and onions in peppered and salted layers, with a dredging of flour between the strata; he had spread himself on baking-powder biscuit and the sweets included sorghum molasses, stewed dried raspberries and prunes. "'Most anybody but a Poland China, a Chester White, a Berkshire or a common piney-woods razorback would have considered that a-plenty," the stock tender observed.

"I didn't say it wasn't, did I?" the old bullwhacker protested. "I wasn't hinting. I was just wondering what there was in it. No harm in that, is there? What makes you so dog-gone sensitive, Hank?"

Here the younger of the Circle Bar youths interrupted in his turn.

"She calls me her baby," he announced vaingloriously.

"That's right. I wisht I had one of her letters here. She writes a daisy letter."

But the stock tender was still smarting under what he thought was a reflection on his hospitality and was not to be diverted.

"I don't know what's in that can," he said severely, addressing the old bullwhacker. "It might be tomatters and it might be peaches or patty deform sparrergrass. There's a chance of it being axle grease. It was there up on that shelf when I come to the station — just the way it is, with the label tore off — so I don't know whether it's oxtail soup or otto of roses. If I opened it up I'd probably be disappointed, and I've had so many disappointments in life that I don't want to risk it. I figured that there was chuck enough without that to satisfy a gentleman that was a gentleman, but ——"

"There was one of these here English lords wanted to marry her when the show was in Omaha," the younger puncher broke in bravely, trying to fix the old bullwhacker with a bright eye. "But not on your tintype! 'I wouldn't wish any,' says she. 'Kind hearts is more than cornets,' says she, 'and I ain't got the right kind of a lip for a mouth-piece nohow. Because my name is Birdie don't signify that you can put me in no gilded cage. You hear me warble?' That's what she told him. Sure! She could have married rich more times than I've got fingers and toes. I wisht I had the picture of her that she give me. She wrote on it: 'From Birdie to Her Baby.' Oh, I'm solid!"

"I reckon you are — all above the roof of your mouth," said his companion.

"Birdie's baby" made an angry rejoinder and there might

have been trouble but for the diplomatic intervention of the old bullwhacker, who opined that the heads of the disputants were equally soft, and turned the conversation to prunes. At the end of the repast the elder of the boys drew the short straw and remained to wash the dishes, while the rest sought the shade at the back of the barn. There the stock tender, who had recovered his good humor, expressed unbounded admiration and some envy of the Circle Bar infant's audacity and powers of fascination.

"It gets me!" he owned. "I s'pose it's knowing that you've got that handsome face and them winning ways that gives you the nerve to brace a lady like Birdie. Didn't even have a letter of introduction to her, did you? Nothing but your month's wages and —— Well, well! Listen to that, Sam, will you? Why here's me and Sam has been a-worshiping Birdie from afar for — le' me see; it must be clost on to thirty years, ain't it, Sam?"

"Clost on," agreed the old bullwhacker. "She was quite a kid them days; couldn't have been much more'n twenty-five, I reckon. Yes, we was too bashful — Hank and me — even to ask her what she'd drink. It takes these good-looking young and impetuous cusses like Bud here — or Wesley Clow. Wes was a considerable gone on Birdie in his day. Want me to tell you about it, Bud?"

"You're a couple of old liars, the both of you," said Bud with a red face. "I don't care. Tell all you want."

The old bullwhacker shifted his chair back a little more into the shade, and after settling himself comfortably and coughing ceremoniously in the approved afterdinner fashion proceeded to tell all about it.

. . . . . .

Wesley wasn't no such a superb speciment of robust young manhood as what you are, I'm bound to admit, Buddy. He hadn't got your high polish nor your easy gracefulness nor your bearskin chaps nor nothing; not even the neck shave you're sporting. The first time I seen Wesley there was a fluff all over his cheeks that made a man want to hold a match to and touch it off, and his hair had been cut with a cold chisel on the edge of the chopping block. He had heard tell of barbers, but that was as far as he'd ever got. He was a considerable long-legged and knobby-jointed, and the butternut pants and hickory shirt that he wore looked as if he'd made them himself from memory and guessed short at the arms and legs. He give you the impression that he was a-wondering why things was the way they was and didn't it beat the Dutch. We was camped over the other side of White River waiting for low water with a bunch of cows when he came a-wabbling and a-weaving into our visions. Them days I wasn't in the freighting profession. I was just a common ord'nary cowpunch — as far's I could be a common and ord'nary anything.

Well, as I was a-saying. Wes came a-weaving into camp afoot. And naturally picking me for the boss of the outfit he told me howdy. I asked him where his horse was and he says "buzzards." Then I asked him which-a-way he was headed.

"If you'll tell me which-a-way the vittles is I reckon I can show you," says he; and with that his knees wabbled worse than ever and he sat down right sudden.

Well we got his backbone away from the skin in front of him by interposing and wedging about half a kettle of

beans and various other foodstuffs in between and after a while he felt well enough to tell his sad story. Seemed like he come from some place in Missouri where the land was a considerable upended and some of the citizens could read print. One of them literary characters, who owned clost on to ten head of cattle, besides a team of mules and a wagon, found a piece of newspaper that told about the Belle Fourche country where a man could get a hundred and sixty acres all in one place, covered with grass and so flat that a cow could climb it 'most anywheres and turn round in a wide circle without falling off. The paper made it out better than that, but this here mountain cattle king had made his success in life by allowing for breakage and the disposition of a hen in figuring how many chickens he'd get from a setting of eggs. Anyway he started for the Belle Fourche and took Wes along with him, but when he struck the Nebraska line he found a hundred and sixty that was flat as a flatiron all over. So he stayed there, and Wes — being that kind — went on.

"It was three days ago my horse up and died on me," said Wes. "The old fool must have tried to graze offn a rattlesnake, which is certainly the worstest kind of pasturage. Anyway the snake bit him on the nose and he swelled up and went hence. I toted the saddle quite a ways, but it got too heavy for me and I finally drapped it. Yesterday about noon, when I was plumb tuckered out and wondering where all the folks lived round this section, I heard a horse a-coming along at a pretty good clip behind me and when I looked I seen there was a man on him. I waited for him just by a little coulee that was growed over with a right

smart of sagebrush and greasewood, and in a minute or two he pulled up a likely looking roan beside me and asked me if I was traveling or going somewheres and what my name was and where did I come from.

"I didn't like the way one of his eyes follered a twist in his nose, but I told him my name was Wesley Clow and that I come from near Taneyville and was a-going to the Belle Fourche.

"'Why, you must be Old Man Clow's boy!' says he. 'The offspring of my dear old friend. Who'd have thought of seeing you out here? Shake, Wesley! Put her there, son! Well, well! And how's all the folks round Taneyville?'

"'You knowed my pappy then?' I says.

"'Knowed him!' says he. He looked over his shoulder and I looked where he was a-looking and seen a little dust rising away back yander on the trail.

"'Because if you was a friend of pappy's and you've got any vittles in that roll——' I says.

"He hopped offn his horse right sudden and begun to loosen his cinches. 'I hain't got no grub,' he says, 'but here's what I'll do; Can you ride bareback? Well, you just take this here horse of mine for a present and ride him. That's all right; I owe your dear kind old pappy a heap more'n that — a heap! You're welcome as the flowers in May. Take him and ride him like hell straight along the trail west about twenty miles and you'll make a good place to stay overnight. Good bed and elegant grub. Tell 'em I sent you and that you're a friend of mine and they'll treat you like a prince and potentate. Only you've got to make time or you'll get catched in the dark. I'm going to wait

here until some of my men come along with a bunch of my horses. Like as not I'll see you in the morning. Now let's see how Old Man Clow's boy can ride.'

"He talked right tonguey, and all the while he was taking off his saddle, which had a blanket roll and a good rope and a carbine tied to it, and by the time he stopped talking he had me hoisted on the roan and had started us off with a slap. I didn't have time to edge in a word.

"Well, I went. I couldn't do no other way. But I looked back once and seen him ducking down into the coulee and it seemed like he was moving quick. That roan was some considerable and he felt so good under me that I didn't do much thinking for the first mile or two. Then I sort of wondered.

"If that stranger with the twisted nose owed my pappy so much as a dollar and got out of Taney County alive without paying it he was some considerable too.

"Yet if such was so and my old man had forgot himself and done a kind action there didn't seem to be no good reason why I shouldn't get the good of it. Then I kind of wondered about the blanket roll and why there wasn't no vittles in it to go with the fry-pan handle that I seen sticking out, and that made me think of the vittles that was a-waiting for me twenty miles ahead on the trail — and the good bed. I thumped a heel into Roaney's side and made time.

"After a while I slacked up and then pretty soon I chanced for to look back and I seen dust a-coming and made out men a-horseback in it.

"They was a-coming lively too — gaining on me — and I couldn't have that. I'd show 'em how Old Man Clow's

boy could ride. I done that. When I next looked back there wasn't no dust in sight, so I jogged a piece and I was still going that-a-way when Roaney stumbled and throwed me over his head. When I got up I seen that he had made up his mind to feed round not less'n two rods off from me and I was so interested trying to get closer so's I could jump and grab the bridle rein that it was quite a surprise when somebody hollered to me to throw up my hands.

"Well, sir, gentlemen, there was five in the party, and all of the guns was a-pointing my way, so I done what they wished; and they throwed a rope on me and wound it round and round, though I offered to give them the twelve dollars I had on me without no trouble if they'd give me my horse and turn me loose. They was so busy talking about some fool cottonwood tree that one of them knowed about a mile or so from where we was that they didn't pay no attention to what I was saying. But finally one of them asked me where I got the roan and I told him. Another — the one that knowed where the tree was — allowed that I was lying and if I wasn't I was too big a fool to be let live. I don't know how he figured that I was a fool. I told him so and I told him I could whip him and some more things. Then another fellow spoke up and he allowed that if they didn't lose no time getting back to the coulee they might get the this-that-and-t'other yet — if he hadn't rustled another horse. They certainly talked mighty curious. Anyway they settled it by tying my legs and leaving me a-laying there on the ground, and I ain't telling no lie when I say that the moon was away up and the coyotes was howling mighty close before one of them come back and untied me.

"'We got your friend,' he says mighty cheerful. 'I thought I'd come and get that rope of mine. It's a good one and I'd hate to lose it.'

"'You didn't bring my horse back,' I says; and he laughed like it was a good joke. I was so mad I'd a notion not to take the drink he offered me and I wouldn't ask him no more questions. He told me where your camp was, but I didn't ask him that. Mighty curious doings! I can't make head, tail nor middle of them."

That was Wes' account of it about the way he told it. You can see what kind of a boy he was — simple-minded and trusting. I took quite a shine to him — remembering bygone days forever fled, when I too was simple-minded and trusting, and got the dirty end of it every time. "Here's a boy what needs the eagle eye of observation on his doings and the whispering voice of wisdom and the finger and thumb of authority at his ear," I says to myself. "What Wes ought to have ain't not only the guiding hand of experience on the scruff of his neck, but the elevating influence of a noble example. Associations and contacts with a man like me would be the making of Wes," says I to myself — and it would be aheap of sport to have him round.

With them thoughts I went to Dan Scott, who was mismanaging the T A N Ranch about that time, and I seen to it that he offered Wes a job with us; and then I took up the duty of educating the boy with the whole-souled and willing help of every kind-hearted waddy on the ranch. There was some things that Wes knowed already — like straight-up, and coming in out of the rain, and beans when the bag was open, and pounding sand in a rat hole if the

directions was on the hammer handle; but in other respects there was much to be wished for. The cookstove was a real curiosity to him, and it was quite a while before he could get over the idea of water running out of a faucet by just turning that little contraption at the top, and he turned pale when he first seen an egg beater operating. Most of us up-to-date fellows had got beyond and apast regarding alarm clocks and coal-oil lamps as startling novelties, but where Wes was raised they hadn't got discontented with roosters and the good old reliable nonexplosive tallow dip if firelight wasn't good enough for you. But I'm bound to say that the boy learned. In a week or so it begun to look as if I'd run out of things to explain to him and give him wise counselings about — and then come a morning call from Mary Ann.

It's kind of curious, but when I was a-looking at that can you're a-holding out on your friends Mary Ann come right into my head. Not but what in some respects sometimes women is a heap like canned goods, being as you can tell by looking at a can in a general way what it is. It ain't but seldom anywheres equal to the picture on the label; but you can say, "This here's peaches," or "This here's plain pork and beans," as the label may be; but Mary Ann kind of seemed to have her label tore off.

Most all you seen of her was a sunbonnet and an old no-shape calico dress — and only the upper half of the dress account of a long no-color riding skirt. She was riding a big rangy sorrel with collar marks on his shoulders, and when I tell you that the boys looked twice at the horse for once they looked at her you can sort of figure that she wasn't no dream of beauty. Nor yet she wasn't no sight to

make a man shudder. Back in under her sunbonnet there was a young girl's face that wasn't none too rosy nor not too well filled out; she had kind of dark eyes and was dark complected and her mouth didn't look as if it had a habit of smiling, though there wasn't no sour pucker to it like some. That was about all you could say. When she spoke it didn't make you think of sweet silver bells a-chiming nor little birds a-caroling in the bosky glade nor laughing tinkling brooks nor none of them things. You just heard her speaking and paid more or less attention to what she was saying, like Dan Scott done.

It was about her cow that had strayed off with its calf two days ago and couldn't be found, hide nor hair, having probably got in with a bunch of the T A N cattle; and they needed the milk and hadn't we seen nothing of her — a black-and-white cow with pa's brand and only one horn?

"Why didn't your pa come here to ask himself?" says Dan, looking up from the mower we was tinkering at. "Does he think we run his cow off?"

"You'd be in mighty big business if you had," says Mary Ann. "Pa allowed it would be a waste of time asking you — and I reckon he was right."

She didn't snap it out; just stated it as a fact, calm and sober, and was turning her horse to ride off when Dan straightened to his feet and took off his hat with a flourish.

"Excuse me," he says. "I don't want you nor your esteemed pa to think for a holy fraction of a second that we ain't anxious to be neighborly and obliging. We ain't took the liberty of running off your respected cow, not as far as I know, and we ain't had the pleasure of seeing her, but I'll sure institute the strictest kind of inquiries and perse-

cute the rigidest search for her with the greatest of animosity."

He looked round at us, grinning like a coyote, and his eye fell on Wes, who had been standing with his bridle over his arm acquiring a heap of information about mowing machines that the inventor never guessed of. "Mr. Clow," says Dan, "will you favor me by climbing on your horse and helping the young lady find her cow?"

Dan was certainly a humorous joker and could think up the comicalest things. The only one who kept a straight face and a shut mouth at that was Wes himself. As for Mary Ann, she hadn't waited and was quite a piece off already. The funny thing was that Wes took Dan in dead earnest and before any of us realized what he was doing or going to do he'd jumped into the saddle and was a-pelting off after Mary Ann. Dan tried to call him back, but he choked up with laughing and his voice failed.

In about a couple of miles Wes nearly catched up with her and she pulled up and wheeled her horse round.

"You just quit trailing me and get right back," she says, and Wes judged she meant prezactly and excisely what she said. He was surprised some too.

"I'm a-going to get your cow for you, ma'am," he says.

"You'll raise hell a-getting my cow for me," she says. "You get right back."

"I'm right sorry, ma'am," says Wes, "but I've got orders from the boss and I reckon I've got to follow them."

"I ain't got no objections as long as you don't follow me," says Mary Ann, and she kicked her sorrel in the ribs and rode on in about a bee line for lower Beaver, Wes trailing after her about ten rods behind. They rode that-

a-way until they come to Beaver, and Mary Ann turned up creek.

"She ain't up that-a-way," Wes hollers, and swung down into the bottom to'rds the old Bateman crossing. Mary Ann didn't pay no attention to him though — not for a minute or two. Then she stopped and looked back. Wes was jogging along and not looking back and I reckon she got kind of curious. Anyway she turned round and followed him. Pretty soon he rode up a gulch and she couldn't see him, so she hurried along, and by the time she'd got to where he'd disappeared she seen him coming back — and waited.

"She ain't with that bunch," says Wes, as if they'd been talking right along. "If she's the black-and-white cow I seen yesterday she must be farther along down. They'd drift with the wind."

He rode on down the creek bottom and Mary Ann followed along. After a while she edged up.

Once or twice he rode up some gulch or got up onto the table and looked round, and when he come back to the bottom Mary Ann was a-waiting. And she edged up every time a little more.

"That ain't no way for a lady to talk," says Wes, kind of to himself.

"I didn't say nothing," says Mary Ann, and she flicked the sorrel on the neck with the end of the rein and edged up alongside. "I didn't say nothing," she says again.

"Away back there," says Wes: "'Raise hell a-getting my cow for me.'"

"Oh!" says Mary Ann. "I didn't go for to say that," she says. "It kind of slipped out. It's a great byword with

pa. He says 'You'll raise hell this' and 'You'll raise hell that' all the time. He told me 'You'll raise hell getting them T A N thieves to tell you anything about that there cow.'"

Wes spurred up the bank, a place where it kind of sloped, and looked round and then slid down again.

"There ain't no more breaks for a right smart," he says. "I reckon we'll run on her this side of the crossing though. You drap behind, please, ma'am; the trail ain't wide enough for two."

"It slipped out," says Mary Ann. "What I said back there, I mean."

"Yes, ma'am," says Wes.

A half a mile on the trail widened out and Mary Ann edged up again.

"When you've heard a byword like that right along all your life and you ain't thinking of what you're saying — it kind of — slips out."

"Yes, ma'am," says Wes.

"Can't you say nothing but 'Yes, ma'am'?"

Wes studied on that for a while; then he says, "Is your pa's brand 7 U 7?"

"Yes, ma'am," says Mary Ann.

"Because I seem to recollect that was the brand on the black-and-white cow I seen yesterday hereabout, and there's a bunch feeding up that there break and — yes, there she is, sure 'nough!"

And sure enough there the cow was and the calf with her, and Wes didn't lose no time cutting her out and heading her back. Mary Ann told him that he didn't need to trouble no more, but he just nodded the sober way he had and went

on driving her. They had to go slow because the cow wasn't noways speedy, but they'd nearly got back to where they started from on Beaver before Wes opened his head.

"What made your pa think so?" he asks her.

"Think what?" says Mary Ann.

"That the T A N — er — men wouldn't tell you nothing?"

"Oh!" says Mary Ann. "Well, because here we come on that poor defenseless outfit and hogged a whole hundred and sixty acres of their range that they needed to keep their cattle from starving to death. Not to mention the spring. And all they'd got in the wide wide world was about a hundred and sixty miles square and all of Beaver and part of Horsehead and Witch Creek. They naturally would feel a mite hostile, wouldn't they?"

Wes nodded.

"Well, wouldn't they? You're one of them."

"Yes, ma'am," says Wes, and circled out to haze the calf along.

Finally they come to a fork in the trail to the T A N and Mary Ann broke about half an hour's silence.

"I won't have no more trouble now," she says. "We live just over that there ridge. You don't need to go out of your way no more."

"I reckon that's so," says Wes.

"I'm sure obliged to you for your kindness," says she.

"It ain't my kindness; it's Mr. Scott's," says Wes. "I reckon your pa'd better keep that cow fenced in if he doesn't want her to stray."

"My name's Miss Mary Ann Bodley," she says.

Wes nodded and looked at the cow.

"I wonder ——" he says.

"What?" asks Mary Ann, and gave him his first smile.

"I wonder how come she lost that horn."

"Pa knocked it off with the milking stool," says Mary Ann.

"I never could understand how he could bring himself to do such a thing — until this minute."

"Yes, ma'am," says Wes. "I reckon I'll be moving on." And he moved on.

"Did you find the young lady's cow?" asked Dan Scott when he got back.

"Yes, sir, I done found her," says Wes. "What would you like for me to do next?"

"Why," says Dan in his smooth way, "if you'd just as soon I'd like to have you go and knock your head against the snubbing post in the corral until I tell you to stop. I've got my suspicions that post ain't as firm set as it ought to be to stand the strain it's going to have when we brand them horses to-morrow, and I'd like to make sure. It won't hurt your head, I judge, if it's thick enough to let you go traipsing off the best part of a day hunting a loblollied, tiddley-winked, goodness-gracioused granger's cows for him. Don't you think they give us cowmen trouble enough? No, you don't think! You naturally couldn't. If you didn't have no legs you couldn't walk, and if you had the misfortune to be born without arms it wouldn't be reasonable to blame you for not scratching yourself. I was wrong to chide you, Mr. Clow. Of course you didn't think."

"You told me to help her find her cow," says Wes.

"Certainly," says Dan, "and I don't notice you jumping

particular alacritous to test that snubbing post like I asked you. Well, I'll try to overlook it this time, but the next time I tell you to round up any 7 U 7 stock and return same to owner with compliments of the T A N don't do it. Sabe?"

"No?" says Wes with his wondering look.

"No," says Dan. "Just rope and tie me and keep me tied until you can get me took to the Yankton Asylum. I'll be crazy, and there ain't no telling what I'd do if I was let to run loose."

But that wasn't nothing to what the boys had got to say in the bunk house that evening. I said a few things myself that was about as mirth-provoking and as side splitting as anything you ever heard, if I could recollect to tell you. But Wes took it all like it was remarks about the weather, until Gid Spencer said something concerning Mary Ann that was considerable bordering on the nature of what you might call a raw crack.

Wes looked at him, and the way he looked everybody whooped, it was so dog-gone serious and disapproving. Gid laughed more'n anybody, but Wes kept on a-looking the same way without batting an eye, until Gid slowed down to a giggle.

"Well?" says Gid at last.

"That ain't no way for a gentleman to talk," says Wes, mighty slow and solemn, and everybody whooped again, Gid included, though he got a mite red in the face.

But Wes kept right on a-looking at him.

"You want to take it up?" says Gid, winking at us.

"You heared what I said," says Wes.

"That settles it," says Gid. "When reflections like that

is cast on my character I get a craving for blood that nothing but blood will satisfy and appease. We'll shoot it out."

"Shoot it out?" says Wes.

Johnny Wells explained it to him.

"He means that you shoot at him with a gun and he shoots at you with a gun both as near simultaneous as you can and a mite previous — if possible. This here is what we call a gun, Wes." He took down his own from his belt hanging on the wall and broke it and shook out the cartridges on the table. "Them's got powder into 'em and you see this is lead a-sticking out at the end. Notice on the back end there's a little round do-funny. That's got stuff inside kind of like what's on the end of a match. We showed you about matches last week — remember?"

Wes nodded.

"Well, now we stick these here cartridges into these here holes. I'll take 'em out again, but we'll play they're all in. Now you wrap your finger round this jigger and pull it. See what that does? Makes this here go round, and at the same time it plunks this dingus down on the cartridge plumb square on the little round do-funny — like striking a match. That sets fire to the powder, which pushes the lead right violent out through this long tube — sabe?

"And that's what we call shooting. Anything what the lead hits is likely to get a hole in it. Get the philosophy of it?"

"I reckon," says Wes, taking hold of the gun kind of interested. "You put these in the holes and shut it up and then you point it at whatever you want the lead to hit, don't you — this-a-way?"

He pointed in the direction of Gid's stomach. Johnny let out a yell and grabbed his hand.

"I didn't have my finger wrapped round the jigger," says Wes, laying the gun down and covering it with his hand. "Wait, I want you to tell me. Supposing I want the lead to hit them three dirty pictures Mr. Spencer has got tacked up over his bunk, I'd point right to the middle of them one after the other and pull the jigger each time I pointed, wouldn't I?"

Before Johnny could grab again he picked up the gun, aimed and pulled trigger. You wouldn't have believed that he did it more than once before the gun was a-laying smoking on the table, and it didn't seem there was time for that once. It sounded like one shot, too, but three of the shells in the gun was empty and there was a neat hole plumb center through each one of Mr. Spencer's dirty pictures.

"I was fooling you," says Wes to Johnny. "I reely knew about guns all the time. I cut my teeth on the barrel of pappy's old cap-and-ball and he give it to me a year or two after when he got himself one of the newfangled ones."

Then he turned to Gid.

"We'll shoot it out if you say so, Mr. Spencer, sir," he says, "but that won't make it no way for a gentleman to talk."

"I allow you're right about that, Wes," says Gid. "I was just joking."

So there wasn't no more talk about Mary Ann for that while, but about three weeks later — maybe less — Ed Barry and Tracy Lamson come in and swore up and down that they'd seen Wes and Mary Ann riding together over by

Witch Creek. Barry had his field glasses along and him and Tracy watched them by turns and they was a-going to have sport with Wes when he got in.

You'll find out that it wasn't no way for gentlemen to act," says Johnny Wells. "Won't they, Gid?"

Gid made out to smile, but he didn't say nothing. Tracy allowed that he'd cod Wes a few lines anyway.

"But the rich part of it was that Wes quit her," he says. "Sure! Quit her cold. Just rode off and got down in a washout and hid. We could see his face plain and he looked plumb disgusted; and all the while here was Miss Bodley a-lingering and moving on a piece and lingering again and looking to see if he wasn't a-coming back. Sometimes she lingered as much as five or ten minutes. We couldn't see her face account of the old sunbonnet, but I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't have a kind of disgusted look too; but all at once she give up, and went a-kiting and a-flying. Wes peeked up over the edge of the washout after a while and when he seen she was gone he climbed his cayuse and followed along on her trail; but he didn't ride like he wanted to catch up with her this side of kingdom come."

"I don't blame him," says Ed. "That girl certainly ain't much. I don't say she ain't a perfect lady, but she sure don't lack more than a quarter of being the half of nothing whatever. I don't believe she's real bright, myself. I tried to talk to her once."

"And that old sunbonnet!" says Tracy. "And that calico dress! And them shoes! Oh, I reckon they're clean, but they ain't — well, they ain't nothing — nothing out of the way and nothing else, like you say."

"Boys," I says, "this here is certainly a good joke, but

you've carried it clear from Witch Creek here and I reckon that any farther would be too far. I won't say that a man ain't excusable in being curious under some circumstances, but if he puts his eye to a keyhole he'll be a heap more respected if he don't tell it — nor what he seen. The way I look at it is that we're a peaceful family and it's a pity to have it broke up with scandal and dissensions and corner's inquests and such. You boys had best forget all about this and live on to a ripe old age, loved and honored by all what know you."

Well, finally I made them see it that-a-way. It seemed like Wes was crossing the head of Witch Creek, where that little park is, when accidental and unexpected he run on to Mary Ann. She was a-setting in the shade where the water run over the rocks and her horse was cropping the young green grass along the bank a piece away, with his bridle dragging, so at first Wes thought she might have been throwed. That was why he stopped. Then he seen that she was playing with a heap of little pebbles, picking them up one by one and holding them to the light, and he thought that was sure kind of curious for a grown girl; and then he started to go about his business.

"I was afraid you was going to stay and talk me to death again," she says. And he didn't know she had seen him.

"No, ma'am," he says.

"That's a change anyway," she says, tossing a pebble into the creek, "but I wisht you'd keep still long enough for me to talk to you."

"What-all did you want to talk to me about?" Wes asks her.

"Nothing in particular," says Mary Ann, stirring the pebbles round with one finger. "I just wanted you to find out that — I talked like a lady most generally."

"I ain't doubting it," says Wes.

He waited for her to say something more, but she didn't. So, not wishing to be unpolite, he asked her what she was doing with them pebbles.

"Playing they're nuggets," she tells him. "Pa washed some nuggets out of the creek in Strawberry Gulch once. If they was gold I'd buy ——"

She stopped and then went on to say that pa hadn't bought nothing but drinks for himself and the crowd. "Ma and me didn't get so much as a new pair of shoes," she says.

"It's right sightly here," says Wes, looking round.

"You're getting your tongue worked loose, ain't you?" says Mary Ann. "Yes, it's right sightly. That's why I come here when I can get away. I wanted pa to file on this place, but he allowed it was too broken. Pa likes plenty of plowland. I reckon he thinks that some time he might take a notion to work it and then it would come in handy. But it certainly is pretty. I'd like to have a little cabin with trumpet vines a-growing over it and posies all round set right there on that there knoll — and a spring house. There's a cold spring right behind the knoll and the limestone on the hill there splits as flat and smooth as a board. I'd have a big slab of it to work my butter on and I'd fix — well, there ain't no use talking about it and these here ain't nuggets either." She shook them out of her lap.

Wes allowed he'd have to be moving on and she told him that if he'd wait as much as half a minute she might let him ride a piece of the way with her, being she was going in the

same direction, and before he could figure a way out of it she'd led her horse to a bowlder and got on it.

"Why don't you say something?" asks Mary Ann after a while. "Has the cat got your tongue again?"

"I reckon not," says Wes. "I was thinking," he says.

"I suppose you was thinking that I don't talk much like a lady after all."

"No, ma'am," says Wes. "I wasn't thinking of you no ways at all." He didn't mean to hurt her feelings; he was just telling her what was so.

"Probably about himself and how smart he is," says Mary Ann, addressing her horse and patting him on the neck.

"That certainly is a right sightly place," says Wes, sort of absent-minded. "I'd like to have a little cabin there myself — and a bunch of cows — and — I wonder!"

"That's what you mostly do when you ain't talking a streak, ain't it?" says Mary Ann. But Wes didn't seem to notice.

"You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Clow," says Mary Ann after a minute or two. "I reckon I'm feeling ugly, but I hadn't ought to have said that. Maybe if the cat got my tongue I'd be better off, but that cat would sure need all of its nine lives. I reckon your girl never talked to you like I do."

"I ain't got no girl," says Wes.

"Lucky for her!" says Mary Ann. "And yet it's sort of curious. They say 'most any kind of an excuse for a fellow can get some fool girl. Maybe you ain't tried. Don't you like girls?"

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"I didn't want to lie and say I did," says Wes when he told me his side of it; "and I didn't want to be unpolite and say I didn't," he says. "So I left her right then and rode back a ways."

"Without saying nothing?" I says. "Well, the least said the soonest mended, and of course you wouldn't want to be unpolite to a lady, no matter if she was wearing a sunbonnet."

Wes said that he'd heard a right smart about that sunbonnet, but all the ladies he ever seen wore them account of not wanting to get freckled. I said that Mary Ann wasn't so bad looking, and he said to that that he hadn't never looked at her — not to notice — and wouldn't probably be much of a judge, not having seen but a few and one of them was a colored person.

"I ain't never thought about their looks," says he, "and this here Miss Bodley, all the times I've seen her ——"

I asked him how many times that had been and he looked kind of foolish and said that it was only twice, excusing the time he'd got her cow for her.

"Just happenstance, it were," he says. "And she didn't say scarcely nothing then. I didn't neither."

"Don't let it happen so again no more," I says. "The next time you see her coming get down into some washout and hide till she's gone."

"Sho!" he says, staring at me.

"Yes," says I, "I'm sort of keeping cases on you, son."

He studied a while and then he says: "I don't want for you to get no wrong ideas about this here. That little gal ain't got no use for me only to plague me and say things

I can't make head, tail nor middle of. I reckon she enjoys that. I don't know why."

"You wouldn't," I says. "Personally," I says, "I've always found Miss Bodley as meek as Moses and as mum as a mummy with the mumps, but I reckon when she seen you she says to herself, 'Here's my pie! Don't nobody trouble to bring me a knife.'"

"I'll keep away from her," says Wes. "I'd done made up my mind to that."

But it looked like there wasn't no need for him to worry. A month went by and he didn't so much as see her tracks. Then one day he reco'nized the sunbonnet a-coming his way and he concluded to wait and see what would happen; but it looked like when Mary Ann seen who it was she turned square round and rode back faster than she'd come.

"I reckon she's mad at me," says Wes, telling me.

"What do you care?" says I.

"I certainly don't care one particle," he says. "Why should I care whether she's mad or glad? No, sir, it don't make no difference to me. If you think I care you're fooled a heap. So's she, if she thinks so."

He had one of his long spells of meditation; then he says: "I reckon she has her tribulations though. It must be sort of lonesome on that ranch with no neighbors, and her ma dead. I judge from what I hear tell that her pappy ain't none considerable. I just judge so."

I left him still a-studying, and time went on the way time does go on. I didn't hear no more about Mary Ann and I didn't tech on the subject of females until that summer they got up a dance over at Pass Creek and I had to argue quite a spell to get Wes to join the crowd of us that was

going to take it in. He'd sort of suspicioned that there would be a passel of gals there and I had to own up that there was chances of such.

"But what if there is?" I says. "You've got to be exposed to them some time or another and it's like measles if you put off until you're along in years — apt to be fatal; whilst and whereas if you come down with them at our time of life chances are you'll have a light case and get over it. And you've got to learn to dance," I says.

"I can dance all right," says Wes. "Gabe Slyfield, a boy I used to know, learned me. He played the jew's-trump too, and he learned me that."

"You're all fixed out then," I told him. "All you need is a happy expression and a shirt and a suit of clothes; and you can get all of them at the store."

So finally I talked him down and we went to the dance, and sure enough there was a passel of gals there and amongst them, looking like a ragweed in a bunch of posies, was Mary Ann.

I certainly felt right sorry for Mary Ann. She wasn't wearing her sunbonnet, but she had on the same old calico dress, though it was washed until the pattern was 'most scoured out, and the way she was a-setting you seen that she was trying to hide her feet. She'd got her hair in tight braids wound close to her head, and somehow that made her look like a young one; and there was a bow of washed-out lilock ribbon under her chin that I reckon made me feel sorry for her more'n anything else. But she sure looked forlorn, setting there and nobody paying no attention to her, excepting to look at her once in a while and whisper and giggle once in a while. I noticed Wes looking at her, but it

was when her head was turned. Her pa was among them present at the door spectating — and a sweet-scented parent he looked too!

Once a Z Bell waddy by the name of Crotty did go up to Mary Ann and crook his arm at her, but she shook her head and didn't even smile. Then by and by I bumped into Wes all dressed up in his new clothes, and asked him why he wasn't a-circling in the giddy mazes.

"There's Miss Bodley a-setting there waiting for you to ask her," I says. "Or you could go over and talk a streak to her if you don't want to dance. You said you could, though."

"Not these here newfangled fancy dances," says he.

Gid Spencer and Johnny Wells come up then and I told them how Wes was just a-telling me what a daisy foot-shaker he was.

"Bet you a dollar and fifteen cents he don't know one foot from the other," says Johnny. "Him dance!"

"Not these here fancy dances," says Wes. "I don't know nothing about these quadrilles and round-and-round hugging carryings-on, but I can dance the kind I know."

"Not no kind," says Johnny. "I've got a dollar and fifteen cents that says you can't lift one foot up and set the other down to any tune that was ever scraped off a string or blowed through a hole."

"Show him, Wes," I says. "Show him how Old Man Clow's boy can dance."

"I'll take you up on that," says Wes to Johnny. They had just finished the quadrille and was going to their seats. Wes walked up to Matt Bingham, who was wiping off his face and neck with his fiddle on his knees. "Can you play

Turkey in the Straw?" he asks. "If you'll play it while I dance I'll give you a dollar and fifteen cents or a large strip of hide."

The next thing you know Wes was out in the middle of the floor and dancing; and when I say dancing I mean prezactly and excisely what I say. As slow as he talked and moved and turned things over in his mind, the way he lifted them feet of his and set them down was certainly surprising. It might have been the sticks rapping on a snaredrum or a hungry red-headed woodpecker drilling for breakfast the way it sounded. Double shuffle, heel-and-toe, whirl and rattle and stamp and whirl back and stamp, Matt sawing away his level best and liveliest and never once ahead a half of a fraction of a second, and Wes looking all the time as if the cold clay clods was a-falling on the coffin of his nearest and dearest.

I just took my eyes offn him the once and I seen Mary Ann a-taking it all in, her lips parted and a look on her face that give me all the information I wanted as to her reasons for a-coming to this shindig, shoes or no shoes. Then Wes give an extra jump and come down on the last note with a flat foot on the floor that sounded like the crack of a gun. At the same time he let out a yip that would have done credit to a full quart — and then, as the feller says, there come a storm of applause.

They wanted him to keep it up, but he shook his head and edged through them to Johnny Wells and collected his dollar and fifteen cents, which he turned over to Matt. Then he made a break for the door and when I followed him out I found him untying his horse. He was going back to the ranch. He'd seen enough of this here and he needed sleep.

He couldn't get over this here thing of hugging dances; it didn't seem like a lady'd ought to let herself get hugged by anybody that come along — and right afore folks.

"I took notice she didn't. I'll say that for her," he says.

"Who didn't what?" I asked him.

"I just happened to think of Miss Bodley," he says. "She didn't, and I give her credit for it." He throwed his leg over the saddle.

"I don't know but I'll go back along with you," I says, wishing to pursue the subject.

"You don't need to do that," says he, and off he went.

"Hum!" I says to myself. "Want to be alone with your own steaming thoughts, do you? Just happened to think of Miss Bodley, did you? Against hugging promiscuous, are you? Well, it's a right curious world and some of us has got a heap to learn about it."

It wasn't but a little time after that I seen Gid Spencer a-talking to Mary Ann right interested, and she said something or another twicet and shook her head and then got up and gathering in her pa at the doorway quit the dazzling scene.

Wes had kind of got standing with the boys after that shooting practice of his and this hoedown of his helped it along a heap. Johnny Wells says: "He may look like a plumb fool and he may act like a plumb fool, but I notice that when it comes to a showdown it's 'most generally the other fellow that looks foolish."

I reckon that was the way of it. He'd got to be a good cow hand too, so Dan Scott had told him he was to draw puncher's wages at the end of the month. Pay day was a-coming on slow as usual, but it was mighty close all the

same; so us boys was hustling in the hay for all we was worth, so's there wouldn't be no good excuse for detaining us from town when it did come. When we wasn't thinking of the glad event we was talking about it or making preparation.

Ed Barry and Tracy Lamson had been busy figuring a system to beat the wheel and they'd got it down fine and was going to pool their capital to work it and then quit the cow business for good and all and live in pomp and gilded splendor. Gid had a string of girls that he was going to distribute his society amongst and he was studying the fashion plates in a clothing catalogue.

Johnny Wells and Bud Westerman was eating all they could of Dad's cooking so's they'd get sicker of it than ever and appreciate the hotel and restaurant grub. Not a one of them was a-going to take more than a temperate drink, just for the form of the thing, but they all looked forward to an evening at the Jewel Theayter and there was some mention of the lady actresses there. I said that I was a-going to put in my time looking after Wes and seeing that he behaved himself.

"I don't know as I care to go," says Wes. "I ain't used to town ways and I don't believe I want to get used to them; besides which, I aim to save my money."

"What's the use of it when you've saved it?" says Barry. "You've got to spend it some time, ain't you — unless you die first? And there ain't no sadder sight on earth than a corpse with money in its pockets. I remember a man down in Texas once that when we went through him after his sperrit had winged its flight we found clost to a hundred dollars sewed up in his vest — and he'd been to town only

the day before and must have had it with him. I never forgot that and never will. It was a lesson to me."

"What are you a-saving it for, Wes?" asks Johnny.

"Well, I don't know," says Wes, sort of dreamy. "I reckon some of these days I'll take up a piece of land — at the head of a creek somewheres, where the water's clear and there's rocks for it to run over and a sightly knoll for a cabin and maybe a cold spring and"— he catched my eye on him —"and such," he says. "Up in the Belle Fourche country, I reckon. That's where I started for."

"Hum!" I says to myself. "Learning right along, ain't you?"

But I made up my mind that he was a-going to go into town with me and get initiated right under my watchful eye, so I kept after him and finally he weakened and when pay day come and we had received the meed of our toil and sorrow six solitary horsemen might have been seen wending their way on the keen jump for Blueblanket — and Wes was among them.

Well, we left the other boys, Wes and me, and had a right pleasant and instructive time taking in all the sights of the town. I showed him Judge Wilson's new steel windmill that he'd just put up, and the wax heads in Miss McArdle's milliner store window, and the new brick calaboose — explaining how the bricks was laid and stuck together with mortar — and quite a few other objects of interest; and then I eased him into Duffy's saloon and introduced him to Pat and ginger pop. He didn't seem to cotton to Pat, but the pop sure appealed to him and he drunk six bottles of it before I could drag him away from the bar. Then we watched Lamson and Barry working their system, still hope-

ful and not losing as much as you might think; and from there we went over to the Golden Palace Restaurant and Wes showed them how Old Man Clow's boy could eat.

It was getting pretty well along by the time the boy heaved a sigh and give up. "Now," says I, "I'm a-going to make your eyes bug out like fretful porcupines."

And without no more words I took him down the street and into the Jewel and done just what I said. He looked at the curtain, all lit up, with the picture of the lake and the boats with the striped sails and the residences with dooms and spinnacles backed up against the purple mountains painted onto it, and I could feel him shiver like a terrier at a rat hole. He looked at the big chandelier and the boxes with their yellow plush hangings and brass rails and at all the gilt gingerbread fixings and mirrors one after the other, and you could see he was scared to death that somebody would kick something over and wake him up.

I sure got the worth of my money right there, but there was more to come — when the fiddlers tuned up and begun to play and then when the curtain went up and Mick and Mack come on and done their stunt. By ginger! I thought he'd have a fit the way he strangled and whooped at them chestnuts. Then there was the Tyrolean bell ringers and Wes was real interested in them, but it wasn't till the next number — Miss Birdie De Lancey, the Nightingale of Niggerhead Gulch, in her world-famed and renowned song-and-dance specialties — that the smilax was reached.

Well, the first thing Wes drawed in his breath and let it out again with a whoo-oo-oof — like he was blowing a

spoonful of hot soup. "My gollies!" he says in a whisper. "My gollies!" And the way that come out you didn't hardly need to look at him to know that Birdie had hit him like a safe dropping from the third story. He sat there just a-worshiping that there vision of legs and loveliness, a-drinking in the melodiousness of her voice like he had that ginger pop, and even more so, and a-following every move she made similar to a fireworks display. I never seen a good dog fight even get the strict attention that Wes gave to Birdie's performances.

The first song she sung wasn't noways suitable for young ears like Wesley's, but I reckon he didn't sabe, so it was all right. When she danced I'm bound to say that he tried not to look and blushed a considerable, but he told me afterwards that he knowed she didn't have no idea that her dress wasn't staying down the way it wasn't, and that some lady'd ought to tell her about it. She sung another song about her babe. Yes, sir, she did. Her babe. And Wes liked that and when she sung about Those Little Old Patched Pants That Johnny Wore, and come to how when Johnny died and called her to his bedside I looked at Wes and the tears was astreaming down his face.

When she got through with her turn and the encore Wes rubbed his overworked hands on his knees and turned to me. "My gollies!" he says. "I didn't know there was anything like her in the world!"

"Quite a few of them, son," I says. "Quite a few," Then I got a shock.

"Do you reckon," he says, swallowing, "do you reckon I could get to speak to her?"

"Certainly not," I says. "You don't think that a high-

toned exclusioned lady like her would have anything to say to a cowpuncher, do you?"

"I s'pose not," he says, and he studied on that a while. Then he says: "But I'd like right well to speak to her — and by gollies! I'm a-going to!"

Well, I naturally seen to it that he didn't that night. Birdie fluttered round the tables a spell after that and if I hadn't been bashful I might maybe have arranged an interview. But I didn't. I told Wes that the gentlemen she was a-talking to was old friends of her folks and childhood playmates and that they'd be offended and she'd be offended if he made any breaks like he'd mentioned and that if he'd be good and go back to the ranch with me right away I'd study out some way for him to get acquainted with the lady. He finally allowed that maybe I knowed best and I got him away. The rest of the show wasn't interesting him nohow. But he talked Birdie all the way back and all of the next day until the other boys come a-straggling in, and it was a considerable strain on my mind what to say to ease him off without roasting the fairest and noblest and smartest of her sex and getting him hostile and mule-headed.

Then I was foolish enough to mention the matter in confidence to Johnny Wells, and when Johnny had wiped away his tears and got his voice back he goes and mentions the matter in confidence to Gid Spencer, and right there the trouble begun. It seems like Gid went to Wes and got to conversing about Birdie, particular careful and respectful; and having the esteemed honor of knowing her and knowing that Wes was a gentleman he said he'd do what he wouldn't do for his own brother, and give him a knock-down to her.

I reckon Wes must have mistrusted that I'd got some pure tyrannical and narrow views about lady actresses on the stage — maybe Gid had told him that I had; anyway a day or two later I come back from Beecher's Buttes with a bunch of beef cattle for shipping and found that Wes and Gid had pulled their freight into town together and it was noon the next day before they got back.

"Well, Wes," I says, taking pains to speak kind and cheerful, "was she all your fond fancy painted her — or was it fancy done it?"

"Mr. Stegg," says he, giving me that sober steady look of his, "you've got the wrong idea about that lady, Miss De Lancey, if it's her you're making mention of. She ain't like the common ordinary run of ladies and you've got to be acquainted with her to realize what she is and not be no common ordinary run yourself; but I wouldn't like to hear no man make light of her. I'd be a right smart put out. I would so."

"Wes," I says, "to change the subject, could I borrow ten dollars offin you until I get good and ready to pay it back?"

He got red in the face. "I'm powerful sorry, Sam," he says, "but I ain't got no ten dollars. I — I ain't got no money at all, the way it is, or you could have it free and welcome. You know that."

I sure knew it, and I knew the way his summer's wages had gone to. Also I knew just how much good it would do to try to keep Nature from taking her course. So I didn't make no such attempt and from that on Wes was a-wearing the trail bare into town every time things was so he could get away. Sometimes Gid went with him, but not every

time. Rumors and reports was to the effect that ever since the dance Mr. Gid had been doing his best to be neighborly with old man Bodley. I knew of two times when circumstances pointed strong to him visiting at the old man's claim shack. His horse was outside and he wasn't occupying no space on it both times I noticed. However that might have been, Wes certainly worked hard enough to make up for any time he lost on them jaunts of his, and that's what Dan Scott said when I asked him why he didn't make the boy stay on the reservation.

"How would I make him?" says Dan. "You tell me. Every so often he comes to me and says: 'Mr. Scott, sir, I aim to go into town to-night and I'd like for you to let me have what wages is coming to me, please, sir.' I might say: 'Sure! take your hornswoggled odoriferous wages and my holy holocausted blessing, Mr. Clow. Go plumb to with them and don't give yourself the trouble of coming back neither.' Well, I don't say that because I feel down in my heart that he'd go, and he's the only one of you that's worth any more'n the cheapest kind of three-on-a-grid accommodations in Gehenna. A sweet outfit I've got!" says Dan. "A luscious lot of lop-eared, loafing, lallygagging, lunkheads! Here's Gid Spencer half the time chasing that little mudhen of Bodley's."

"Meaning Miss Mary Ann?" I asked him.

"Meaning I'm going to get some work done on this ranch if I can persuade you gentlemen to fall in with my views," he says. "I figure on doing some fencing to begin with, and I'd like to have you start in hauling wire bright and early to-morrow morning while Gid and Johnny amuse themselves getting out a few cedar posts and Mr. Clow and Barry

excavates holes in the ground to put them in. Tracy and me can do what riding there is to be done for a spell. What you waddies need is exercise, and by the jumping jubilant Jehosaphat you're a-going to get it — if there ain't no objections on your parts."

I told him I reckoned it would be all right with me and he said he was pleased to hear it and real obliged. Then as I was going away he called me back.

"That kid Clow is getting his innocence rubbed off a considerable in these town jaunts," he says. "He's got away and beyond ginger pop too. The last time — did you notice it on him? Well, why don't you talk to him?"

I said shucks I couldn't talk to him, and he said he thought that was my specialty. I didn't bandy no words with him further, but I made up my mind that the first good excuse I got I'd crawl Mr. Gid Spencer's royal American hump and learn him about enticing the youth of our land into paths of intemperance and also concerning the closed season on mudhens. I kind of wondered if Wes had heard about Gid's growing habit of riding over the ridge evenings. Seemed like he must have. And he had, but he didn't scarcely believe it was Mary Ann.

"It don't seem hardly reasonable," he says. "That gal ain't — Miss Bodley ain't hardly the style Gid would cotton to, I wouldn't think. Sort of — I don't know, but — she ain't got much to say, Miss Bodley ain't, and no style. She ain't —— She's a lady though."

"Seen her lately?" I asked him.

"Not more'n just to pass the time of day," he says. "She ain't got much to say. But all the same — I wonder ——"

"What?" I asked him.

After a while I asked him again. "What was you wondering about, Wes?"

"What's your ideas and opinions as to a lady smoking cigarettes?" he asks. "My step-aunt she smoked a corncob pipe and there wasn't never no finer lady than what she was; and my grandmammy she smoked a pipe and dipped snuff. She was right well thought of. But someways a cigarette — what's your idea?"

"I'm kind of strict myself," I says. "Personally I think that dipping snuff and smoking is as far as a lady should go in the use of tobacco. Some don't; but that's the way I feel."

"And about short skirts?" he says. "Of course if a lady is a professional lady — well about language?"

"It depends," I told him. "If a lady is a professional mule-skinner or something like that you might take a liberal allowance off what you think. But why do you ask me these here strange questions, buddy?"

"I was just a-wondering," he says.

"I've got ideas on the subject of liquor used by the young and tender — if you want me to tell you too," I says.

"I reckon I don't," he says in the same slow sober way. "I reckon I ain't so young and tender but what I can go to town and have a good time if I want to," he says. "I'm going to town to-night and I'm going to get full if I want to. You'd get full too if — if you ——"

He walked away without finishing what he was a-going to say, and Johnny Wells santers up and begins to prattle. "Wes allows he's going to town again," he says. "He'll be in elegant shape to dig post holes in the morning, won't

he? Say, Birdie isn't doing a thing to him — deviling him round the way she is, coaxing and petting him one minute and then quitting him cold and carrying on with some of the other suckers. I wouldn't be surprised to hear of trouble some of these pleasant evenings. Wes is looking as if he'd wintered with a hard crust on the snow already. And talking about Birdie, who do you think Payne Simmons told me he seen at the Jewel about a couple of weeks ago? Miss Mary Ann Bodley, if you please. Yes, sir, Payne says she was there, sunbonnet and all.

"Her old man was with her though, and Payne says he looked as if he wished he wasn't. He's a shiftless old rooster, but I reckon she makes him do 'most anything she wants excepting hustle. I figure that she wanted to see what a show was like and naturally made the old man take her in there whether or no. Plumb ignorant! But they got out of there just as soon as Birdie had finished her turn, and she was as red as a beet."

"That's news," I says. "How do you think you'll like getting out posts?"

That set him off. There wasn't none of the boys that was real enthusiastic over Dan's fencing idea. But all the same the work started bright and early the next morning. It was a big pasture the upper end of Witch and I took my first load of wire up there and found Wes already digging post holes. He certainly looked tough, his eyes all red where they ought to have been clear white, and lines round his mouth. Seemed like I could just see his head cracking in all directions. But he was digging. He was so busy digging that he wouldn't no more than grunt when I spoke to him, so I set the brake on the wagon and lit my pipe and

just watched him work, not speaking so's not to annoy him. But I don't s'pose I'd sat there ten minutes before he looked at me out of them bloodshot eyes of his and said a bad word and intimated that I'd better mosey along if I didn't want the shovel on the side of my jaw.

I told him that he'd got me mad at him and he needn't to expect no bromide tablets nor sympathy nor nothing from me, and I moved on up the line Dan had staked. I'd got to the bend by the limestone banks — just about where Mary Ann wanted her cabin — when I seen a old magazine fluttering by the side of the trail leading through the cottonwoods down to the creek and I got out and picked it up. The cover was tore off, but the front picture was there — a mighty peart good-looking female a-setting on a table and swinging a pair of right shapely legs. Underneath it said it was Minnie Hauk as Carmen.

Well, as I was starting to get in the wagon again I seen fresh horse tracks, shed all round, on the trail, and being curious I followed them on down and come on to Mary Ann herself. She was bending over the water and I couldn't make out at first what she was doing. Then I seen she had an old milk pan and was sloshing it round like she was washing pay dirt. I watched her for a while and sure enough that was what she was doing.

"You won't find no gold in that limestone formation, Mary Ann," I says, and then laughed to see her jump.

"I'm just playing at finding gold," she says when she seen who it was. "Pa washed out some nuggets at Strawberry Gulch one time. But they say gold is where you find it, don't they?" She spoke kind of breathless.

"That's so too," I says, "and so's rubber boots and religion."

"If you found some nuggets where would you go to sell them — if you couldn't get to go to Deadwood — and how would you do?"

I told her all I knew, which — if you'll believe me — wasn't much on that particular subject. Then I told her that we was going to fence her out of her mining claim and she allowed that Mr. Spencer had told her. "But there's always wire nippers," she says.

"Mr. Spencer is a fine, handsome, high toned boy," I observes.

"And nobody knows it better than what he does," says Mary Ann.

"We all try to copy after him at the T A N," I says. "Wes Clow is particular ambitious that-a-way."

"He's making an elegant success of it," she says, and the sunbonnet being turned my way for half a second I catched a glimpse of her face and somehow got the idea that maybe Gid Spencer wasn't so short-sighted after all. But she'd got quite a curl to her lip.

"Too bad Wes is sick!" I says. "I hope it ain't nothing serious."

The sunbonnet switched round again full on me. She didn't say nothing, but she'd turned white — plain white.

"Yes," I says, "he's too sick to be digging post holes out in the sun all alone by himself not more'n half a mile down creek from here, which is what he's a-doing. Well, I reckon I'll have to wrench myself away if I'm a-going to get another load here by noon."

"I s'pose he's been getting full again," says Mary Ann. "That's my book you've got there. I thought I'd dropped it somewheres."

I gave her the magazine and pulled my freight. Having the team I couldn't disgrace myself by riding out to see what happened, but it was the way I figured. I wasn't no sooner out of sight than Mary Ann catched up her horse and rode down creek.

She found him a-laying on his belly trying to drink up the visible water supply of Witch, and she waited until he raised himself up with a heart-rending groan and turned and seen her. She didn't say nothing. Just looked at him much the same as I'd done a while back.

"Howdy!" says Wes finally. "I was getting myself a drink," he says.

"I allowed that was what you was doing," she says. "Does it always make you holler like it hurt you; or is it just because it ain't nothing but water?"

He turned red and said it was because he had a misery in his head and she said a misery was something, and he says you bet it was something.

"You're getting so's you can talk back," says Mary Ann. "A heap improved from when I first met up with you, ain't you?"

"Maybe," says Wes. "I guess I'll be getting back to my post holes."

"You'd better have another before you go," says she. "The morning's young yet and one more won't hurt you. So you think that maybe you've improved? Well, I don't; but then I may be mistooken and drinking whisky and

gambling and carrying on with girls that ought to be ashamed of themselves may be improvements. I thought you was particular about a girl acting like a lady."

"I am," says Wes, looking black at her from under his eyebrows.

"But you like a lady to be up-and-a-coming, ain't that it?"

"That's it," says Wes.

"And have lots of pretty clothes and be right careful not to wear too much of them at any one time or place?" says Mary Ann. "Not old sunbonnets and calico dresses?"

"That's it," says Wes, sneering.

"And smoke cigarettes?"

"You've got it figured down fine," says Wes, laughing like a man laughs when he don't feel like it. "Them's the kind I like. Sure!"

"It's just as well to know a person's tastes," says Mary Ann. "You ain't afraid of folks laughing at you?"

"I certainly ain't," says Wes. "If folks is willing to take the resk they're kindly welcome."

"I'm glad of that," says Mary Ann, and she spoke sort of meek and low and a mite trembly. "I — I reckon folks would laugh at you quite a considerable if — if you took me to the dance they're going to have at Pass Creek two weeks from to-night. Are you certain sure that you wouldn't be afraid to, Mr. Clow?"

Well, that sure took Wes aback. "I — uh — I wouldn't be afraid to," he says, "but ——"

"Then you'll take me?" she cuts in. "That sure is clever of you, Mr. Clow. I hoped you would, but I thought maybe you wouldn't want to. I'm right sorry now I spoke

to you the way I did. A man has certainly got the right to spend his time and his money the way he wants to, whatever folks think, and it ain't their business to tell him how. I beg your pardon, grant your grace and hope the cat won't scratch your face. Then I'll be a-waiting for you two weeks from to-night — and come right early, please."

Wes was so plumb flustrated that he nodded. He couldn't have spoken no ways.

"And being a gentleman you won't mention to nobody that you've asked me?" says Mary Ann. "I've got particular reasons for not wanting you to."

Wes nodded again, staring at her like she was some new and unusual kind of an uncommon ghost. Then he started to speak, but at the same time Mary Ann started her old sorrel — and she started him on the jump — and Judas! That girl could ride.

Wes looked after her, rubbing his wet hair and almost forgetting his headache. "Why — what — I'll be dog-gone!" he says. "I — I wonder!"

And he went back to his post holes wondering to beat the band.

Two weeks from that the shades of night was a-falling fast on old man Bodley's cabin and all round the neighborhood other places. The chickens was already on their roosts shifting round to find a better place for their feet and talking about it in low tones. The old black-and-white cow was bedded down over the corral chewing her cud and a-listening calm and thoughtful to a song that was being sung — mostly through the nose — by somebody inside the cabin. It went about like this:

Oh, Reuben, Reuben, he come with his carpet-bag
And a wallet of dough and he went to the show,
And he took on an elegant jag.
He woke up along in the morning
And wept when he found he was broke
And a-holding his head, which was heavy as lead,
These here was the words that he spoke:

And then what followed on — with a patter of feet dancing — sounded like:

It doesn't do to trust 'em, to trust 'em, to trust 'em;
It doesn't do to trust 'em, for they only want your dough.
Her hair was gold, her eyes was blue,
I thought that she was fond and true.
But it doesn't do to trust 'em when they're dancing at a show.

Wes rode up just as the song was beginning and got the first of it as he was walking to the door. He stopped and listened and then started to go back to his horse, but he changed his mind and when the song was finished he knocked. For just a few seconds there was scurrying sounds and then somebody hollers, " Come in if you're good looking," and he went in and took one step and stood a-staring.

There was a young woman a-setting on the table swinging a pair of mighty shapely slim-ankled legs in skin-tight shining red silk stockings and a-clicking the high heels of her little red leather slippers together. She was a dark-

complected young woman, with her black har heaped up high on her head and fastened with a big tortoise-shell comb sparkling with rhinestones with a black lace shawl thing kind of hanging from it and falling down her back. She wore a big red paper rose stuck in her hair behind her ear, and the red of that matched what was on her cheeks and lips. Her neck and throat was like the cream on the top of a pan of milk in color and smoothness and from neck and throat down the same—and quite a considerable down. Her arms was bare too, and between her fingers she held a lighted cigarette. She looked at Wes, her red mouth smiling and her eyes looking bigger than what they were, account of being extra blacked round the lashes. It may have been that that made them look extra bright.

"Hello, old stick-in-the-mud!" she says. "Right on time, ain't you? If you hadn't been I might have fooled you and gone with a handsomer man ——

"It doesn't do to trust 'em, to trust 'em, to trust 'em."

"Well?"

"Great God!" says Wes. "It's Mary Ann!"

"Did you think it might be pa?" says Mary Ann. "I sent pa to town with a five-dollar bill and free permission. Pa would raise hell if he seen me in these stockings."

She stared at him in the face as brassy as you please and kicked out one ankle at him while she blew out a puff of cigarette smoke. But all the same, the color got deeper on her forehead and from her chin down — where it showed.

"Yes, he'd raise hell," she says. "What are you gawp-

ing at me for that-a-way, you reub? I said he'd raise hell. Say, Reuben, don't I look up-and-a-coming? I got my lily hooks on a slab of dough and I allowed I'd give you a surprise. Want a drink? I got it — the good old stuff."

By this time you couldn't tell the rose behind her ear from the ear itself, so far as color went. But she kept right on.

"I'm Carmen," she says. "I'll bet you a horse that I'll be the belle of the ball too. Wait till the boys see me!

"Why don't you say something?" she says. "Old cat got your tongue again? Tell me how pretty I am; tell me that you didn't know there was anything like me on earth. Here — I'll sing a song and do a dance with it."

Then Wes spoke up and his face was as white as hers was red. "Ain't you got no shame?" he says slow and cold, and at that Mary Ann shivered and reached out one hand to pull her dress down — and took it back again.

"Go cover yourself up decent," says Wes mighty nigh shouting it. "Go cover yourself, and thank the good Lord that it was only me seen you. If anybody else had I'd have killed him — and you too. You to act this-a-way — you, the gal I — I thought ——"

She had whipped the lace scarf from the comb and throwed and pulled it tight round her shoulders, but Wes turned to go. His hand was on the latch of the door when she give a cry that stopped him in his tracks, and then quick as a flash she had him by the arm and hid her face against it.

"You — you d-don't like me this-a-way and you don't l-l-like me that-a-way," she sobbed. "Oh, Wes, tell me which-a-way you'd like me to b-be and I'll b-be it!"

The words wasn't hardly out of her mouth before Wes

had both of his arms round her, squeezing the breath out of her and kissing the ear that had the rose stuck behind it — which was all he could get at.

"Gal," he says, shaking all over, "I don't like you noways, but I reckon I love you any which-a-way you are. I reckon I always must have, honey gal; only for a crazy spell I took and —— Oh, my gal, how could I! Oh, say anything, do anything! I cain't help but love you."

A little while after that Wes led her horse up to the door, all saddled and bridled, and knocked again, and Mary Ann let him in. But she wasn't wearing the old calico dress and sunbonnet, like he'd told her, nor yet the Carmen outfit. Something new altogether and a jacket to match the long riding skirt, and a wide-brim hat with a genuine ostrich feather in it; and the way she looked it's a wonder that Wes ever did get her onto the old sorrel; and then the way they rode — most of the time at a walk and Wes scared to death she'd fall off and taking the proper way to prevent it — it's a wonder that they got to Pass Creek before the dance was over. But there was a heap to tell. Mary Ann had to tell him how she'd found a hundred and sixty-three dollars' worth of nuggets down by the creek and how she'd gone to Rapid and sold them and bought her pretties and how only yesterday she'd staked off a couple of claims there on Witch — one for him alongside hers.

"It's a right sightly place," says Wes. "We'll build our house there. We sure will."

Then he started to tell her about Birdie, but Mary Ann stopped him and said that Gid Spencer had kept her posted right along, and Gid was terrible grieved that Wes was

misconducting himself in spite of all he could say or do to head him off into the straight and narrow trail.

"You ought to thank Mr. Spencer, Wes dear," she says.

"I'll give him — thanks," says Wes, setting his jaw hard. "I lay I give him a thanking he'll remember."

I was among the innocent and highly entertained spectators when Wes paid his debt of gratitude. It may not have been full payment, but Mr. Spencer was more'n satisfied — a heap more. He wasn't no hog. Of course there was a wedding, but it wasn't until nearly a year after that, account of there not being no more nuggets found, though a heap of dirt was scratched up along Witch. It was just a pocket that oughtn't to have been there by rights. They built their house right on the knoll though, Dan Scott considering that the blamed country was going to settle up anyway, and that Wes might as well have his pasture as anybody. I reckon Wes is right prosperous to-day.

"It wasn't Birdie at the Jewel all the same," insisted the Circle Bar youth. "You can't get me to believe that — not if you took your oath to it. I wonder what's keeping Billy with them dishes!"

Billy, the other Circle Bar boy, answered that in person. He came forth from the stage barn smacking his lips loudly and patting himself expressively. "Well, I found out what was in that there can," he said. "It was licking good. Pineapple."

"What!" ejaculated the stock tender, starting up from his rawhide-seated chair.

"Pineapple," repeated Billy, grinning. "Too bad that can wasn't large enough to go round. It was a plumb sur-

prise to me when I got it opened — all rusted and dirty looking the way it was. But mamma! The flavor. Sweet as sugar and yet just enough tart to it to make it go good. A real pleasant surprise!"

"I said that can somehow reminded me of Mary Ann," said the old bullwhacker.

VI

BENNY AND HER FAMILEE

A LOWER HORSEHEAD granger and his eighteen-year-old son were enjoying the hospitality of the Box Elder stage station on this occasion. They had just triumphantly driven into the station corral three mares and the same number of colts, their own property, recovered after three weeks' absence from a wonted range well within the borders of the neighboring Indian reservation and in the possession of a somewhat corroded bronze antique named Yellow Porcupine. There was a little romance about this, which the granger related to the stock tender and his crony, the old bullwhacker, as he ate.

Mr. Porcupine, officially questioned had answered and proved by competent witnesses that the mares had been presented to him in accordance with tribal custom by his then prospective and very recently actual son-in-law, Joseph Comes-a-Running. Joseph's testimony had not been given, he having retired before the advance of a couple of Indian police with the celerity of movement that had obtained for him his aboriginal agnomen. His new squaw, née Porcupine, had accompanied him, carrying one of the guns and a fair share of the ammunition. They had left a hot trail, but the two dusky constables evidently considered it too hot to be picked up without disagreeable consequences, and so reported.

It then appeared that the courtship of Joseph Comes-a-Running had at first been frowned upon by the head of the Porcupine family, who had no ear for music, and who, when Joseph persisted in playing his lover's flute round the tepee, came out during a serenade and dragged his daughter within-indoors by one of her braids. He then informed Joseph that the customary present of ponies would have to be made before any matrimonial proposals could be even considered. Joseph had no horses, only the one he rode and needed for his own use, but being deeply enamored and of an enterprising disposition he reverted to the practice of his wild free forefathers and when the moon was right rode down to Lower Horsehead and rustled them. All objections being thus removed, the wedding took place, the granger and his son arriving just at the end of the festivities.

"I told the agent, John Brennan, that as far as I was concerned he could charge Joe and Mrs. Comes-a-Running up to profit and loss on the agency books," the granger concluded. "I'd got my horses and I didn't want no bloodshed nor trouble capturing the happy pair. I'd been young myself. I guess John took the same view. He's got a feeling heart, has John, and he wouldn't bust up no honeymoon, even an Injun one. An all-round man, John is. I guess he'll let 'em down easy."

The stock tender emptied a second panful of fried bacon and grease into the stoneware bowl before his famished guests, and then having also replenished the bread plate and pushed the potatoes within easy reach he seated himself beside the old bullwhacker and wiped his heated brow.

"You take it mighty easy yourself," he observed. "I'd cinch the red son of a gun."

The granger explained. He was by no means in favor of a too lenient treatment of Indians who rustled horses from their paleface neighbors, but this here was different. This here Joe Comes-a-Running was a right clever Injun. He had stopped at the ranch more than once and had showed a liberal disposition in the barter of certain *wakopomini* truck — buffalo robes and tanned buckskin; also flour, which might or might not have been government flour. He had also sold the granger a pony or two at a reasonable price, and when he played monte, as he invariably did, he had paid his losses like a dead game sport and a gentleman. Yes, sir!

"And I reckon maybe he knew I'd guess where them mares had got to and would come after them," he continued, "knowing I knew the circumstances. He may have allowed in his simple untutored mind that he was just a-borrowing them from me.

"Me, I'm like Gid here and John Brennan," said the old bullwhacker. "I've got a feeling heart and there ain't nothing it feels for more than a young fellow sparking a girl whose parents regards her in the light of an investment. Old Dave Pirbright told me once that he'd raised children and he'd raised hogs — and there was a darned sight more money in hogs. I claim that ain't no way to look at it — and Dave lied. Take his girl Abilene, for instance. Hank, how much do you reckon Abilene Pirbright netted the old man, from the age of sixteen to twenty — counting day's wages at a dollar and a half and not including the eating tobacco and sundries that he got throwed in?"

He addressed himself to the stock tender, who considered the question thoughtfully for some moments and then re-

plied that he didn't know Abilene and wasn't acquainted with nobody of the name of Pirbright, in view of which he wasn't issuing no estimates nor statistics on such matters. Whereupon the bullwhacker resumed his narrative:

'Twould have bought a right smart drove of hogs, anyway. And Abilene was just one. There was Eudora and Sacora and Magdalena and Belle, besides her, and then there was the boys: young Dave, Mitchell, Crawford, Bill and Valentine. I own up them boys wasn't no bonanza, but most boys ain't. Yes, sir, gentlemen, old Dave wasn't lying when he said he'd raised children. He had raised them all over Texas and New Mexico and Nebraska before ever he struck Dakota and he named them mostly after places he'd been at. He had them all with him at his ranch in the Pass Creek Valley, all but Belle and Sacora and a few he'd shed here and there. Belle married Tracy O'Neill, a young lawyer in Blueblanket, and Sacora was wooed and won by Pete Kellogg, who used to ride for the Circle Bar when Lou Green run it. Pete took up a homestead in the valley alongside of the old man's — and lived to regret it. But it was sure convenient for Dave.

In them days I was proprietor of Hunt's old livery in Blueblanket, and like it always was wherever I've been my society and my advice was a considerable sought after. Besides the prominent citizens of Blueblanket, there was the boys that rode in from the ranches seeking innocent recreation, who would always linger a spell if I happened to be in the mood for talking. Simple as what their lives was, they had their little problems that needed the voice of experience to settle and I never held out on them. One

young man took a particular shine to me, by name of Benjamin Franklin Tucker, working for the Lazy X then. He was a right nice boy — good-looking, able-bodied and cheerful, with a sensible streak in him, which ain't common. One time when the Lazy X boys got paid off he trailed along with them same as usual, but after he'd left his horse and gun with me according to custom he pulled out his wallet and asked me if I wouldn't take charge of that too.

"A man told me a right curious thing the other day," he says. "He allowed that if you didn't have no money you wasn't not nearly so apt to spend it foolishly. Seemed to me that sounded mighty reasonable when I come to think it over. What's your opinion, Mr. Stegg?"

I told him that according to my experience it was true talk. The only other way I knew to keep from prodigal disbursements was to be where there was nothing to buy, contrary to Blueblanket and similar to Sahara.

"I believe it," says he, "which being thus, I have held out what I deem to be all I need for to revel on in a moderate way, drinking only one glass at a time and stringing the time out. I've also allowed myself a couple of cases to toss carelessly on some number that appeals to me. If I'm lucky them two cases will increase and multiply and by staying with the game a little longer I win as much as if I had started with a hundred. An hour or so pleasantly occupied won't make no particular difference. On the other hand, if I lose I wouldn't get no more satisfaction if it was more than two dollars that I lose — and the agony wouldn't be prolonged. Does that sound like good hard horse sense to you, or does it impress you as the mad ravings of delirium?"

"Babes and sucklings couldn't improve on that for a scheme," I told him, and he went away satisfied and didn't come back until a little past eleven. I had shut the doors and put the bar up, so I let him pound and holler until the window pane in the side office where I slept fell in on me in several pieces. Then I got up. It was him that was a-laughing, not me.

"I thought that would wake you," he says, laughing heartier than ever as I showed my face at the broken window. "I just naturally figured that you would hear that and wonder what it was and get up to see."

"You've got a wonderful mind and you sure figured it out to a dot," I says. "I reckon you done some calculating on my meek and patient disposition, too, but if you don't quit that braying and move away from here I'll open the door and show you just where you've got your figures wrong."

"Don't talk to me in that unkind way or you'll make me cry," says he. "Heaven is my witness, I feel bad enough as it is, having to disaccommodate you this-a-way, but the fact is I've got a pressing need of that money I left with you this evening. If you'll be so kind as to hand it out to me through the window, taking care not to cut yourself on the broken glass, I'll go away and not pester you no more."

I told him there was an automatic time lock on the safe and it wouldn't open for nothing but dynamite until six o'clock A. M. He studied on that a minute or two and then asked where a man could skirmish round and get a little dynamite. I told him where to go to, but he seen objections to going there. He was a-suffering bad enough with his

thirst here and now and he had heard tell that you couldn't even get water in them lower regions.

"I'm a-going to hang on to that trust fund anyway," I says gentle but real firm. "I agreed so to do," I says, "and I'm a man that sticks to his agreement — and I know that you are too, Benny. I've got too good an opinion of you to think otherwise. I know the strength of mind you've got, drunk or sober, and while you may be sore tempted to blow all them easy-earned wages in righteous living you'd let your parched tongue cleave to the bosom of your shirt afore you'd give in. You'd scorn to go back on your word. You're too much of a man, too much of a high-toned gentleman, too much of a dead-game sport, too square, too honest, too sensible."

"That's right," he says. "That's me. If you put just that description on a bill and offered a small reward for my apprehension you wouldn't need no name nor no aliases. Anybody who was acquainted with my character would arrest me on sight. But, Mr. Stegg, sir, I don't aim to spend all that money. No, indeedy! Just one teenty tinety drink and I'll tell the boys good night."

"How many of the boys are they?" I asked him, and he told me that there was two of each and the two Mike Morans behind the bar the last time he looked at them. I told him that with drinks two for two bits a dollar would cover the duplicate crowd, for which I would loan him a dollar from my own private purse. After thinking that over for a spell he agreed it was a fair proposition and took the dollar and went away.

It was a couple of hours before I heard him outside the

window again, singing that the horn of the hunter was heard on the hill and the lark from her light wing the bright dew was shaking and did I slumbrest me still and a mess of stuff like that. When he found I'd quit slumbering he told me that he wanted that money he'd intrusted me with and wanted it with interest to date and no foolishness, if it wasn't troubling me too much. Then he said that he had started to make his application earlier in the evening, but on the way from Mike's he had sat down to rest and must have closed his eyes for a minute or two, because the first he knew a cow was a-licking one of his ears and he noticed that his other ear was on the ground.

Well, it was the same thing over again. I finally got him to take another dollar and he went away singing about Bob Ford, the dirty coward, who shot Mr. Howard and laid Jesse James in his grave. He might have stopped on his way back to rest again or he might have got safely to Mike's with his dollar and squandered it, but whatever, I didn't see no more of him until near noon the next day, when he come into the stable accompanied by old man R. E. Morse.

"If you don't feel no better than you look I'm right sorry for you, Benny," I says pityingly.

"If I looked like I feel you'd have screamed at the sight of me and run and hid," he says. "Mr. Stegg," says he, "I ain't got no clear untrammeled recollections of the transpirations of the night, no more'n I must have let my sociable nature get away with my temperance principles, but I seem to call to mind that I made a few unseasonable visits on you and probably misconducted myself in some way.

I'd like to set some place where a cool breeze will hit my hot blushes and have you tell the story of my shame, if you don't mind, sir."

I upended a bucket in the doorway alongside of my chair for him to set on and I related his misdoings to him then and there. If he blushed his boots hid it, but he looked real sorry until I told him that I'd got his money for him intack, excepting for deductions for damages and cash advanced.

"It's more than I deserve," he says. "Far, far more than I deserve and a heap more than I expected. I had a haunting fear that I had blowed the whole pile, and here I am, eased back only a couple of cases and the price of a measly little window, and the way clear before me to the cattle on a thousand hills, to say nothing of them that may stray into the gulches, and only referring to a lovely and accomplished wife and a large and interesting family of assorted sexes. All this I owe to your friendly firmness, Mr. Stegg, sir, and I'll never forget it. When in the days to come you grow old and feeble and unequal to hard labor there will always be a warm corner for you by my kitchen fire — if you can get along with the help — and probably a little better quality of grub than you have ever been used to. Of course if you feel you'd be more independent doing a few light chores round the place to sort of help pay for your board I wouldn't want to stand in the way of your doing it, but I wouldn't ever require it of you, unless there was an extra rush of work. No, sir! You can bank on Benjamin Franklin Tucker's gratitude every time."

"Thanks, Benny," I says. "That's a great load off my mind," I says. "So you've made up your mind to quit hell-

ing round and to settle down and get rich. It's a pious idea. Would I seem anyways sort of nosey if I made bold to inquire how come this turning point in your young life and who the fortunate young lady is?"

"I wouldn't tell nobody but you at this stage of the game and then only in strict confidence," he says. "Because," says he, "the matter ain't technically settled yet, the young lady not knowing the happiness what is in store for her, so far only may be suspicioning it and hoping for it. But I aim to take her into my confidence before many moons and either carry out my program or bust several hame straps. It come this-a-way: I was over in the Pass Creek Valley the day before yesterday at a little before noon and as I happened to be sort of dry —— That reminds me. Where do you keep your drinking water, Mr. Stegg, if you please, thank you kindly?"

I told him where he would find the full bucket I'd just brought in and where was the well, only I'd thank him to go light on the well, account of having a considerable stock to water in the next three weeks. He said he'd bear that in mind and conduct himself with moderation, and I don't reckon he did take in more than two or three gallons.

"If for me the cup you fill, oh, fill it from the sparkling rill," he says when he come back. "I don't see why water ain't good enough for anybody," he continues, "and why folks don't use it more. Did you ever try it as a beverage?"

"Continue your story," I says. "You was dry and you turned in to Pirbright's ranch to get you a drink of your favorite liquefaction and Miss Eudora ——"

"Wrong," says he.

"Miss Magdalena ——"

"One more guess," says he.

"Miss Abilene brung you the sparkling cup and as soon as you seen her ravaging liniments, says you to yourself. 'Here's where I start saving my wages.'"

"There ain't no need of telling you nothing," he says. "You was probably hid behind the door. But there's an elegant young lady, Mr. Stegg."

I told him that was the impression she'd give me and that speaking roughly I should say she was a little daisy and real intelligent and sweet dispositioned.

"And George Washington give the impression of being a tolerable good sort of a general and was well behaved and had a reputation for truth and veracity," says Benny scornfully. "Speaking roughly, it's broad daylight when the sun is shining in a clear sky at noon, ain't it? Or is your impressions to the contrary?" he says.

"Well, you write down what you think she is and I'll sign it," I told him. "Also put down that old man Pirbright is one of Nature's high-toned noblemen and the boys is what you would call the flowers of all manly virtues and the moldings of fashion and the glasses of form and bright and shining examples and patterns for all who would be what they are. I know them words may seem poor and cold to you, but you fix 'em the way you want to suit yourself."

"I don't know as I took particular notice of the rest of the family," says Benny. "But they seemed to be all right. It's a large family, but I like large families, and I aim to have one of that kind myself. Mr. Pirbright certainly seemed like he give the impression of being a whole-souled genial old cuss, but I ain't proposing to take him to my

bosom. It's Abilene I'm after. I ain't marrying the whole family."

"I didn't think of that," I says. "Why, that's so, sure enough! It's just the lady that your matrimonial intentions is concerning of naturally. Of course! Shucks! I guess I'm getting sort of dumb and slow-witted. You ain't marrying the whole family — certainly not. Consequently the rest of the family don't cut no figure whatsoever. By the way, Benny, you ain't acquainted with Attorney-at-law Tracy O'Neill, are you?"

"No," he says. "Why?"

"No reason, only that he's a right nice young man and a powerful good talker," I says. "I allowed you might know him. You didn't get dry a little piece on from Pirbright's and meet up with Pete Kellogg, did you?"

"I seen a fellow of that name at the round-up last fall, but I didn't get acquainted with him," says Benny. "Sawed-off little runt with a twisted nose and the half of one ear missing, ain't he? Has he got a ranch on Pass Creek?"

"Right close to Pirbright's," I told him. "You ought to get acquainted with Pete," I says. "You'd enjoy his conversation."

"I might if he comes out with whatever happens to be on his mind and doesn't set round grinning like an old fool and hinting and beating about the bush," says Benny. "I'll tell you one thing," he says, "I ain't no ways disturbed in my mind about Mr. Kellogg. The closer he lives to Pirbright's and the oftener he calls the poorer his chances would be with Abilene or any other lady of good taste. I tell you I seen him. And as for this Mr. Tracy

O'Neill, I'm modest, but I'll back myself to outtalk any dog-gone lawyer in the kind of talk that counts with a girl. I don't say I ever done it, but I know I could, and I don't feel no tremulations whatsoever regarding either of the gentlemen."

"No reason why you should," I told him. "Tracy and Pete is both of them respectable married men and living with their still-surviving wives. I just thought you'd find them both congenial companions if you knew them — which you probably will."

He looked at me for a minute or two and then allowed he'd got an engagement with some yearlings that he intended to purchase with the money I'd preserved for him.

"So I'll take one more drink on you to show there's no ill feeling," says he, "and then I'll light out and start the beginnings of the notorious Benjamin F. Tucker beef monopoly. You make a note of this here day. It's a-going to be a momentous one in the thrilling annuals of the West. Where did you cache my saddle?"

About a week after that I got a chance to refresh my memory in regards to Miss Abilene Pirbright. I didn't know her at first, only that she was a Pirbright, them girls being tolerable close together in their ages and liable to get mixed in a man's mind if he didn't have no particular and special interest and hadn't been a regular visitor. And yet as she sat on the spring seat of Dave Pirbright's wagon acrost the street from where I was resting from my toil I could see even at that distance that she was a little extra for looks and up and down and all round about the pleasantest thing on Main Street for a man to look at, which be-

ing the case I kept right on looking at her and I took notice that she seemed uneasy in her mind, turning her head this-a-way and that-a-way like she was expecting of somebody and wasn't any too well pleased about it. Finally she clumb down out of the wagon and that was an interesting spectacle too and didn't show nothing that didn't reflect credit on her, so to speak. For about five minutes she looked in at Miss McArdle's milliner-store window, after which she stomped her foot and walked back to the wagon. I started acrost the street thinking I might help her in, but she beat me by about three seconds.

"Waiting for father, dear father, Miss Pirbright?" I asked her.

She gave me a smile that made me appreciate Benny Tucker's references to George Washington.

"Howdy, Mr. Stegg," she says. "Yes, Miss Pirbright is a-waiting for father, dear father, and Abilene's good and tired of waiting. You must have forgot my name."

"You've growed a considerable, Abilene," I says.

"I must have growed two inches since pa went to see a man in at Moran's and told me he'd be back in a couple of minutes," says she. "I reckon I'll get gray haired and stoop shouldered afore he comes out. See any gray hairs?"

She brushed back some of the little curls under her hat and looked at me mighty sassy and sweet. It was a straw hat with a wide brim trimmed up with cherries and ears of wheat and her hair was about the color of the wheat, only with more shine to it. And I'll mention that offered the choice between cherries and Abilene's lips I know which I'd have took and given some boot.

"No silver threads there yet," says I.

"I've been worrying a heap too," she says — "wondering why you never come to see us no more. I'm mad at you! And then calling me Miss Pirbright and setting acrost the street like a bump on a log and never coming near! Why ain't you never been up to the valley?"

"I've got a heap of work on my hands here."

"You could have a heap of work on your hands there," she answered. "Pa would find something for you to do, I reckon, if that's all that's been keeping you away. He can most generally scare up some little chore for our boy visitors."

"But I ain't no boy, sweetheart," I says.

"Huh! I don't know so much about that," says she. "But if you ain't I'm glad of it. I'm good and sick of these awful young boys. Give me a real grown man that's got some sense."

I told her I'd look round careful and see what I could find for her, and then I asked her if she thought Benjamin Franklin Tucker would come anywheres near her notion, and she allowed that Benny had less sense than any of them.

"I like whiskers on a man," says she, looking hard at mine, which I kept trimmed up kind of neat with the horse clippers in them days.

"But I wish pa would come," she says, her sassy look fading out. "I know you don't like to go into them places, Mr. Stegg," she says, "but just to please me, if you'd go into Moran's and drag him out by the ear I'd never stop loving you. Tell him that the clock in the steeple is a-striking twelve and if he ain't here to go home with me

by the time it quits striking I'm a-going to drive this team back to sister Belle's and he'll have some walking to do."

I took notice that she had a considerable of a chin on her when she pressed her lips together and stuck it out. It was a nice chin, well rounded and as pretty as it could be, but it wasn't undersize.

"I'll bring him, dead or alive," I says. "Just wait a minute or two longer."

Overcoming my well-known dislike of entering into places where liquor is dispensed in vinous and malt quantities, I sauntered into Mike Moran's and there was Pa Pirbright — big, red-faced, curly whiskered pa — leaning with one arm on the bar and in the act of pouring. Alongside of him was Bert Herndon and Johnny Root, two of the Bar T. boys, and Johnny was in the act of gathering up his change.

"All the same, it's a-going to be my turn next time," says pa. "I can accept of a gentleman's hospitality as free and willing as the next man, but there had ought to be a limit and you two boys hadn't ought to be setting 'em up all day long without no interruption on my part. Ain't right."

Then he seen me and bellered out a invite to line up, which — being as Johnny Root seconded the motion — I accepted.

"Here's Mr. Pirbright's very good health," says Johnny.

"And his family's very good health," says Bert. "Mr. Pirbright, may you live long and die easy and happy and with no compulsion about it! My respects to you, sir."

"Drink hearty, gentlemen both," says pa, beaming at them. "I mean gentlemen all," he says, catching my eye. "I want to say that you are both — all of you — welcome

at my house night or day at any hour or minute. And the womenfolks is all of 'em of my mind and feel like I do."

"Now this next time it's a-going to be on me," says Bert.

"The last wasn't done properly to suit me, so it's got to be done over again — on me," says Johnny.

"It ought by rights to be on me," says Pirbright. "Honest, boys, you ought to give me a chance oncet, don't you reckon you ought?"

"Not by no means," says Johnny.

"We don't get Mr. Pirbright in town every day in the week," says Bert. "Your money ain't good here, Mr. Pirbright. Not while I'm round."

"Nor while I'm round," says Johnny.

"Gentlemen," says I, "I'm like the Irishman. I hate to have to say anything that would disturb the hi-larity of the occasion, but I've got a little private, pressing and particular business outside with Mr. Pirbright, our loved and honored guest, which business can't be put off without inconvenience to him resulting."

Pa Pirbright said that we was all friends here and what was the business anyway, so I told him that Miss Abilene was a-waiting near by outside and I had orders to see that he didn't keep her a-waiting no longer. I'd no sooner said that than Johnny and Bert made a break for the back door and disappeared.

"Well!" says Pirbright, looking after them with his mouth open. "What do you think of that? Well!"

"I was just a-going to set up a round," he says, "and now they're gone I can't. Too bad! They're right nice boys, them two. They come to see me at the ranch a whole

lot and there's always a good meal of vittles set out for them, and a welcome. Yes, they think a heap of me and so they ought. If you seen my grocery bills——"

"Abilene's a-waiting for you," I says.

"There ain't no rush," says he. "You're always welcome, too, Stegg. And I know the womenfolks will always be tickled to death to see you."

"One of them will be tickled to death to see you right away," I told him.

He looked sadly and lingering at Mike's wooden face and then said he supposed if Abilene was waiting he'd better go. So he went, but when we looked where the wagon had been it wasn't there. Just about the same time Bert Herndon and Johnny Root come round the corner trying to look as if they had just got into town. Pirbright hollered to them, but they shook their heads and passed on.

"You'll find her at Mrs. O'Neill's, I reckon," I told the old man. "She said she was going there if you didn't arrive middling prompt. Half a mile ain't much to a good walker like you."

Saying which, I went back to the livery and took up my weary round of toil.

I reckon it was a month after that before Benny Tucker came into town again. I told him he was a-looking well, and he said right away that either my eyesight was a-failing me or I had a little favor to ask him.

"I've lost all of twenty pounds since I last seen you," he says. "I'm a-getting so I'll have to pack rocks in my pockets to keep from blowing away if I keep on the way

I'm doing. Look at these here hollow cheeks of mine! See where I'm buckling my belt to — and then tell me I'm looking well!"

"Excuse me," I says. "I thought maybe you might be sort of sensitive about it and wouldn't want folks remarking too candid. I know I was that-a-way. One time I got right down to skin and bone under the same circumstances — when I was a heap younger. I didn't look for nothing but an early grave and I didn't want nothing else either. There was a week at a spell that the sight of a pan of pork and beans browned on top and smoking hot didn't excite no more cravings in me than nothing at all. You could have pushed fried spring chicken and milk gravy at me and I would have shuddered and waved it aside like it was fricasseed buzzard. These here pangs of unrequieted love is sure hard on a man's appetite."

"Maybe they are," says he. "I'll take your word for it, not having been afflicted that-a-way myself ever. I'm eating hearty and I don't want no grave, early or late, until I get good and ready for it in the undertaker's opinion. No, sir. It's hard manual labor that's a-pulling me down to the featherweight class.

"But I like it," he says. "It's sure good for a man. You get all soft and fleshy, laying abed until four o'clock in the morning and doing nothing the balance of the day but ride a hundred miles or so and wrastle a few contrary cow critters and obstropolous cayuses and such like. What you need to keep in good condition is to take a few hours extra in spare time and go visit some little hive of industry like Pirbright's and not be made no stranger of. Look at my hands!"

He pulled off his gloves and showed me some calluses and one fresh blood blister.

"So Pa Pirbright is busy these days, is he?" I asked.

"He's a busy man," says Benny. "If it wasn't for that misery in his back, which he's a martyr to and requires rubbing with alcohol a whole lot, there wouldn't be no holding him. As it is, it keeps him on the keen jump supervising us boys when we try to lift a little of the burden from that poor back of his. And then he does a heap of studying to keep Bill and Valentine and young Dave and Mitchell and Crawford out in the free open air daytimes, with plenty of room to move round and no restraining influences except his own and maybe a little mosquito bar over the windows nights. He's building a new barn now — a good big log barn."

"That's good," I says. "It shows enterprise and progress."

"And he's figuring on putting a pole fence round thirty-five acres he's got in sod oats — three poles high and a rider. Johnny Root says he'll undertake to snake out the poles as fast as Bert Herndon can cut 'em. There's two sapheads for you! I reckon they think they'll make themselves solid with the old man, but they're a-going to be surprised one of these bright balmy days. I know just what the old man thinks of them."

"I presume likely he told you in confidence," I says. "Who's working on the barn?"

"Sam Kennedy and Mose Haynes," he answers. "Them two fools is hanging round Magdalena. And then there's Eudora's fellow, Edmond Watts, has been helping too. I've been amusing myself a little, lifting a log here

and there and hewing a few into shape with a broadax."

"Just to keep yourself in good condition?" says I.

"Just to keep myself in good condition," says he. "And I'm naturally helpful and handy. Furthermore you can't go into a man's house three or four or seven times a week and eat his good beef and distract the attention of his womenfolks from their household duties without making some sort of a return in recompense — like helping with the chores or bringing along, say, a plug of tobacco or so or something that would do to rub a lame back with at a pinch if it wasn't a sinful waste."

"That's true," I says. "So they always have plenty of good beef, do they? I reckon them Pirbright boys ain't altogether useless after all."

"As to that, they acquitted Val Pirbright and he left the court without a stain on his character, as you know darned well," says Benny with some feeling. "Anyway, when a gentleman eats beef at another gentleman's board it ain't no part of good manners to ask to see the hide that covers it. I'm a stock owner myself and I propose to buy me a couple of heifers to-day and become more so, so it ain't likely I would favor rustlers nor rustling, but at the same time I don't look for brands on steak nor make insinuations regarding the same. I'd like to have the little horse fed about half a peck of oats, if you please, Mr. Stegg, sir."

"I'll see that he gets 'em, Benny," I says, "and I hope you don't think I meant any offense.

"Before you go, too, I'd like to have you tell me — in strict confidence of course — how you are a-getting on and progressing with Miss Abilene."

He looked all round him mighty careful and then lowered his voice to a whisper.

"In strict confidence, she thinks the world and all of me and I might say worships the ground I tread on," he says. "But," says he, "she's particular opposed to letting me and everybody else see it. A person that hadn't made a study of her and didn't know no better than to go by appearances and actions might think that she hadn't a particle of use for me — but I ain't fooled — not for a holy minute. No, sir-ee! I'm on to her. Once I kill off them two Bar T loafers, Root and Herndon, which I aim to do when I get a good chance, I won't have nothing to worry about. I kind of think maybe that Root is the one that really needs to be exterminated, but I'm a great believer in taking a little extra trouble to make sure, and I reckon there'll have to be two little empty bunks at the Bar T ranch."

"It's best to be thorough," I says.

Then I took notice of his saddle, which was one of those old-time Mexicans, with a horn as broad as a dinner plate and all scuffed up and so brittle that I snapped off a corner of the skirt like a soda cracker.

"This here is a sure-enough deadly insult to your horse, Benny," I says. "Where's the new Cheyenne Collins you had?"

"I loaned it to Mitchell Pirbright," he says, and then looked kind of foolish. "Oh, I'll get it back all right, all right," he says.

There's a right smart of wonders in the world. I don't claim to have seen all of them, but I've seen aplenty that made my eyes bug out and my mouth fall open and my shirt

seem kind of close fitting and strained at the seams with the emotions that was a-swelling within. I've watched the north lights shooting and shifting and dancing in the sky up in the Possessions and I was at the Colorado Cañon before Powell come anigh it. I seen the Chicago stockyards twicet and in Santone a Mexican showed me a chicken with three legs that he had raised from the egg and swore come out of it that-a-way. Besides that, I've read a considerable and I've seen pictures took from photographs of things that was out of the ordinary to an extent that would take a man's breath, but all said and done I don't think there's anything that seems to a man so kind of strange and sort of wonderful, when you come to think of it, as a young woman when she's all fixed up to go to church or a dance or a buggy ride or something special with a male object — particularly a dance. I don't say that every young woman strikes you that-a-way, but I reckon most of 'em do.

You look at one, and here all of a sudden you realize that you ain't never looked at her before. She ain't plain woman like you always believed she was. Certainly not! Her hair ain't human hair. It's too bright and clean and silky and it smells too sweet and them pretty ribbons just belong there like they couldn't belong no place else, except maybe round her waist or in a breast knot, or wherever she's happened to put 'em. Same way with her skin. Seems like there ain't nothing you can think of that's similar — all smooth and soft and pinky white — no human hide about it! You're a-skeered to touch it. If you do you touch it as tender and careful and gentle as if it had a wet-paint sign on it — which of course it hasn't. And her neck-

lace — maybe pearl beads, maybe blue or red or green beads. Anyway and whichever, you take them beads and the neck they're on and it sure strikes you all of a heap and when you quit studying this and that and kind of take in the whole picture you get dizzy.

What is she? What is she a-thinking of when she looks at you? What kind of thoughts does she have anyway? Not the same kind you have. There ain't nothing you could understand about her, not in six months of Sundays. She's one of these here plumb miracles!

Then she starts in talking — and ain't it a pity!

I wouldn't wonder if Benny Tucker didn't feel a good deal set back and awe-struck and generally flabbergasted when he first seen Abilene Pirbright with her wraps off and all tricked out in her pretties at the dance they give in Blueblanket for the boys to buy their hook-and-ladder truck. Took the last lingering smitch of conceit out of him, I should say, and the rest of it Abilene had removed by methods not altogether painless, going by what Benny had told me and what I judged from the things he didn't tell me. Anyway, I seen him a-standing by where she was a-setting and a-looking down at her like he'd made a big discovery and was a considerable exercised in his mind about it — whether it wouldn't run away or float out of an open window if he spoke out loud or made any brash movement. I could see that there wasn't a fold of her fluffy white dress that he wasn't taking notice of and not a line nor a curve anywhere from the top of her head to the tip of her slipper that he missed, and everything making him realize deep down in his heart what a crawling, scaly centipede he was after all.

Just the same, he made out to ask for her program and to mark " B. T." against most of the dances.

" I don't aim to take everything," he says, " and if you'd like to dance the Virginia reel with anybody else I won't make no public fuss."

" That's right liberal and clever of you," says Abilene, looking at the card. She tucked it into her sash and pulled out another one, having provided herself with two in case of emergencies. " They're beginning to grand march now," she says, favoring him with a smile. " I might as well let you have that, being as you was kind enough to trouble to bring me."

So they promenaded off and Benny did get the waltz following the march, but when that was over and he wanted to do some more pencil work Abilene told him to go to Magdalena and Eudora and see if he couldn't make some of his turkey tracks on their programs.

" And ma dances real well and enjoys it," she says. " Maybe you can persuade her to give you one or two square dances."

" I'll do my level best to get her to," says Benny meekly, and he went off and made a bluff at all three ladies — and got his bluff called.

Then being kind of reckless by that time, I suppose, and figuring that he might as well make a miserable night of it, he tackled Mrs. Pete Kellogg and Mrs. Tracy O'Neill, who wasn't neither of them as young and slender and popular with the boys as they used to be once on a time. The result of that was that Abilene had a perfectly elegant time and Benny didn't not by no means, or if he did he sure didn't look it.

Every once in a while I'd see him go up to Abilene and I'd see Abilene smile at him and shake her head and then he'd stand by her for a minute or two, looking like affliction sore long time he'd bore and chewing his mustache one end at a time. Then he'd sidle off. I reckon he took it pretty hard when finally she gave pa one of them precious waltzes.

"But I just naturally love to dance with pa," she says. And then she says kind of sharp, "What did you remark, Mr. Tucker?"

"Nothing," says Benny.

"I wouldn't like it right well if you did," she says. "Particular if it was what I thought you said. I guess I'll go home with pa too. There's aplenty of room in the wagon for me and no need of putting you to the trouble."

"No trouble — it's a pleasure," says Benny sort of absent-mindedly. He was a-looking at Johnny Root and Bert Herndon, who was a-talking together by the door. Then he gave a sigh. "Well, if I can't dance with you I might as well be finding something for little hands to do," he says.

"What do you mean?" she asks, but he had moved off, and just then pa come up a-smiling all over his red face, which he'd washed and polished, and with his curly beard combed and a pair of new morocco boots on, and Abilene looked at him like he was the fairy prince and stepped out on the floor with him.

"Just like she enjoyed it," I says to Tracy O'Neill, who stood at my elbow looking about as gloomy as Benny.

"I reckon she does too," says Tracy. "That's the hell of it," he says real bitter. "Every last one of them girls of his thinks the world of the worthless, loafing, whisky-

soaking old scalawag. My wife does. I thought I'd get everlastingly shut of the whole darned no-account sponging outfit after I'd got married, but not so. I don't mean the girls, you understand, but I've just naturally spoiled every political chance I ever had defending Val and them other pups every time they get arrested for cattle stealing or some other deviltry. I wouldn't get a vote for dog pelter from any one of the cow ranches. Poor old Pete Kellogg is another suffering victim. He — I guess I'd better keep my mouth shut. But it certainly makes me sore to see that old skeezicks out there capering like a goat full of loco weed."

Pa was certainly a-capering, and lame back or no lame back he was sure an elegant and a limber dancer.

"Kind of rough on Benny Tucker," I says. "He's been a-trying to get a dance with Abilene all evening. I've had a heap of sport watching him. I wonder he don't get mad."

"A good thing for him if he did and stayed good and mad," says Tracy. "He's a good boy and he's been steadied down and working hard ever since I first met him. Saving his money and buying stock, too, but much good it will do him with pa and the boys to bum it off him and Abilene to back 'em up! I'm fond of Abilene and she'd be all right, but I've got a powerful lot of sympathy for any man that marries into the Pirbright family. I've warned him and Pete has warned him, but ——"

He was looking round the room.

"Where is Benny, anyway?" he says. "I don't see nothing of him."

I looked round myself.

"I don't see nothing of Johnny Root nor Bert Herndon,"

I says. "Tracy, let's you and me step quietly outside and get a mouthful or two of fresh air. I've got an idea. I may be right and I may be wrong."

I was right. There wasn't much to guide us in the dark, but the night was still, and listening hard we could hear grunts and the scuffling of feet and once in a while some bad language that seemed to come from the other side of the post office next to the hall. We hurried round there and made out one figure sitting down with his back to the clapboards and two others dancing and dodging round in the sunflowers a considerable lively and slamming at each other real enthusiastic. Just as we had took in the situation there come a smack like a three-base-hit and one of the two went down so quick you couldn't see him fall.

"Get up and try it again," says Benny Tucker's voice, kind of breathless and hoarse, but cheerful and encouraging. "Once more for the cigars, sport! If at first you don't succeed, walk round your chair and call for a new deck. You never know your luck. All right, rest if you want to — I'll wait. Maybe Johnny's ready to take another whirl at me by this time. How about it, Johnny? Let's keep a-moving or we'll catch cold without our coats on."

"I've had all I need for to-night," says Johnny, who was the one leaning against the post office. He talked like he had a harelip. "S'm'other night, maybe, if you think you can keep your feet out of my stomach."

He got up slowly and limped over to where his coat was and begun to put it on. Benny walked back to Bert Herndon, who was heaving to get the soles of his boots onto the ground.

"That's good," says Benny. "That's the spirit I like to see. Take your time to it and then get your breath good. There's one whole side of my face that you ain't touched yet all ready for you. Want I should help you a little? What? Say, you ain't quitting? Well, I wouldn't have believed it! They always did tell me that you Bar T waddies was opposed to all forms of violence, but I allowed there must be some mistake, the two of you piled onto me so willing and unanimous. Think better of it, boys! I'm so weak this moment that I can't scarcely stand and you'd have an everlasting cinch. See if you can't find a club apiece somewheres. No? Well, well!"

Bert stopped on his way after Johnny.

"You try and keep from being too disappointed, Ben Tucker," he says. "It won't be but a question of a little time afore we give you all you want. It ain't as if we wasn't never going to meet again."

"I'll be pleased to meet either or both of you and any assistance you want to bring along," says Benny. "Only don't on no account let it be anywhere in the Pass Creek or in any society that you think I'd be likely to object to your being in. Remember not to forget that, because I ain't always as easy and forbearing as what I am to-night."

Bert and Johnny didn't make no answer but silent contempt to that, and Benny, after watching them out of sight, chuckled as if he was right well pleased with himself and picked up his own coat. Then he seen us for the first time and come up close enough to recognize us.

"What's this here disgraceful scene about?" asks Tracy.

"Nothing whatever," Benny replies. "I just called them two boys outside to give them some good advice about keep-

ing late hours and letting their horses stand and allowed it was high time they hit the trail for the ranch so's they could get up fresh for the day's work — just friendly — and the hotheaded fools got right on their respective ears and begun to pull their coats. I'm glad I shed mine, because this here shirt sleeve is tore to ribbons and I've got something to cover it up. Mr. Stegg, sir, would you mind striking a match and inspecting my eye?"

I done that and found that the optic was some puffed but no rainbow hues. His left jaw was swelled some too, but not noticeable except front view.

"Most of the damage is round the short ribs, excepting a couple that Johnny got in on the back of my neck," says Benny. "If he hadn't done that he wouldn't have sustained that shock to his digestion that he was just mentioning, but I couldn't look back of me to see where to place my foot, account of Bert distracting my attention in front. If either of you two has got a few pins my pants would appreciate 'em. I don't know but I may dance some more. I sure feel like action and if I ain't marked up like you say I ain't —— I reckon I've dropped my comb out of my vest pocket. Lend me yours, Tracy."

I called his attention to the fact that they was a-playing the Home Sweet Home waltz right now and Tracy made a run for the hall while Benny and me scooted for the livery, where Benny got into his big wolf-skin coat while I hitched up his team in jig time. Even so, we didn't get round none too soon. Some of the Pirbright family was already in their wagon and Abilene was a-waiting her turn to be helped in when Benny come up and took her gently by the arm.

"I ain't a-going with you, Mr. Tucker," she says. "I'm a-going with pa. Ain't I, pa? There ain't no need for Mr. Tucker to drive way out to the valley."

"Mr. Tucker would just as lief and some liefer," says Benny. "He's sort of bullheaded, Mr. Tucker is, and he's set like the rock-ribbed granite hills on having Miss Abilene's company home. Mr. Dave Pirbright is a good friend of his too, ain't you, pa?"

"The best you ever had," says the old man. "Abby, don't let's have no foolishness. You don't ride in this wagon nohow."

"Just as you say, pa," says Abilene, and she let Benny take her and put her in the buggy.

But if ever you seen a young lady on a middling dark night that acted like she was a-suffering for a noble cause and aimed to be dignified about it, it was her. Benny couldn't see her right well, but that fur coat of his wasn't no protection against the chill that he got on his left side.

"I've sure got to apologize to you, Miss Abilene," he says after they'd gone about three mile without speaking. "It was mighty mean and low-down of me and I'll put in the balance of my life regretting it."

"Regretting what?" she says.

"I don't know," says he, "but it must be something. Maybe it's because I didn't ask pa to dance with me."

She didn't make no answer to that.

"I hope I ain't crowding you," he says after a while.

"That's past hoping for," she told him. "But there's an end to everything and I'll see you don't get another chance. Won't them horses go no faster?"

"We'll try," says Benny, and he give the team a flick with the whip and slacked on the bits.

There wasn't no doubt they could go faster. They done so. Some of the places in the road was higher than what others was and them was the ones that the buggy hit. When that happened Benny would let out a yip and touch 'em up again. But Abilene never peeped. You'd have thought she was enjoying the motion and the fresh air or had maybe went to sleep. Finally they come to the pass, where the grade sloped about a third pitch and the creek bed about a thousand feet below, and Benny wiped the sweat from his forehead and put on the brakes.

"What are you a-slacking up for?" asks Abilene.

"Because my nerve ain't equal to yours, and I've been praying as hard as I know how for the last five miles," Benny says. "There ain't no sense nor use a-straining the patience of a merciful Providence too far. You win."

They got down to the foot of the grade and then Benny spoke up again.

"I hope you won't take no undue advantage of this here after we're married," he says.

"I won't do nothing you don't like — after we're married," says Abilene. "After we're married I'll ride to Putney on a pig and come back floating down the river on a grindstone. But until then I'll thank you to keep away from our place. If that ain't plain enough I'll get Brother Crawford to make it plainer."

"I'm sorry you think that-a-way about it," says Benny.

"I'd be sorry if I felt any other way," says she.

"Why?" he asks.

"Because," says she.

"If you want me to stay away I'll sure do it," he says.

"That's good," says she.

They didn't either of them say no more until they got to the house. Then Benny said he'd go in and start the fire for her so's not to have to wake Crawford and Bill. She told him to please himself, but it wasn't necessary, and she kept on her wraps and stood while he started the heater to going.

"Now if you want me to go I'll go right now and promise you faithful to stay gone," says Benny.

"Thank you kindly," says Abilene.

"But I don't believe you want me to," says Benny.

Then he took a quick step toward her and grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her until her head rocked.

"Why, you miserable little bundle of mischief, what do you mean, deviling me this-a-way?" he says sharp and savage. "Acting without rime or reason! What do you reckon I am that you think you can play horse with me like I was nothing at all? Nerve! Do you think that because I didn't want to break your neck back at the pass that I'm a lump of putty? Look me in the eye and tell me!"

He held her off, frowning at her. She had her lips close set and her chin stuck out.

"Which eye do you want me to look at?" says she. "The one that's bunged up or the other one?"

Benny frowned at her harder than ever and tightened his grip. For a full minute they stood fighting, look against look. Then Benny's hands dropped to his side.

"Kiss me," says he.

Will you believe she kissed him? She did! And the

next thing she had her hot little face burrowed into his wolfskin coat and was a-crying.

"Y-You d-d-damned my pa, Benny!" she sobbed.

"For that matter, I blessed him up hill and down dale right away," says Benny, telling me. "And why wouldn't I?" says he. "He's Abilene's parent and that would cover a multitude more sins than he'd ever have the time or disposition to perpetrate — give him credit for that. We've all got our little weaknesses and pa may have his, but I ain't a-trying to make Abilene admit it nor yet own up that her brothers ain't all that they had ought to be. She's sensitive on that subject. She knows she's got the finest pa and the loveliest ma and the best and smartest brothers and sisters that there is anywheres, and yet there's a passle of low-down, dirty-tongued, envious and lying folks round this here town and county that's trying to backcap the family.

"Would you believe that she got a notion that I didn't appreciate pa and that I didn't have no extra-high opinion of the boys? Yes, sir, and that's what come near setting her against me. I told her that while I thought a heap of her it was my ambition to get connected up some way with the Pirbright family that brought me to the valley in the first place. I told her I was proud to be pa's son-in-law. And I am. He's all right when you come to know him and make allowances. The boys too. They're right nice boys — or will be when they sort of steady down and get their notions of other people's property untangled and quit whisky and go to work."

"How did pa take it?" I asked.

"Tolerable well, considering," says Benny. "He ain't none too well pleased about having Johnny Root and Bert Herndon quitting on their job of fencing for him, but he's a-going to hire a man at his own expense to help me and Pete Kellogg and Eudora's fellow and the two that's after Magdalena. We'll make out. I'm in town to-day to go on pa's note so's he can pay the new hand a month's wages. That's the least I can do, being as it's my fault that it's necessary to hire help."

"When do you figure on getting married?" I asked him.

His lip kind of fell.

"Not for quite a while yet, I reckon," he answers. "There's a right smart of work to be done first and I've got to hang onto my job with the Lazy X. But that don't faze me," he says. "If that old Bible rooster, Jacob, could work seven years for old man Laban to get his girl I reckon I can hustle for a year or two to get Abilene."

"Well, I congratulate you, Benny," I says. "I like to see a man look a situation square in the face and make the best of it. You aim to take up a ranch in the valley near pa, I reckon?"

"Abilene wants we should," he says. "I reckon that's what we'll do. There's good range and plenty of water there. Yes, I reckon I'll have to, dad blame it!"

I figure that Benny was too much occupied the rest of that fall and winter to come into town and get a touch of high life. I might have thought he'd left the country if I hadn't got word of him now and then from Tracy O'Neill. Tracy didn't say much either, only that it was too dog-gone bad and by gosh he hated to see it. Poor old Tracy had

tried for district attorney that fall. He got the nomination, but like he'd expected, the cow vote swamped him at the election. The only comfort he had was that he was acquiring a reputation for being able to get anybody off for anything, no matter what the evidence was. That was after the grand jury had indicted Val Pirbright for the third time and Tracy had got him acquitted. Bill Pirbright was in that, too, but skipped for Montana and that made one less.

"Yes," says Tracy, "my heart bleeds for that poor boy, Benny. He reminds me of myself when I was young and hopeful and didn't have no notion of the influence of women folks. I wish I could help him, but by ginger, he won't help himself! Pa and the boys have about worked him dry, and he takes it all good-natured account of Abilene."

He went away shaking his head.

Another time he come in and brung the news that the bank had foreclosed on Benny's cattle and that the Lazy X had fired him for no reason only he was too thick with the Pirbright boys.

"Family ties is all right, but you wouldn't think a girl would want her man hog-tied by 'em," he says.

I asked what Benny was a-doing and he told me Benny was working at Pirbright's for his board and Abilene's approving smiles.

But finally along about the beginning of May on a Saturday afternoon Tracy comes in on his way from the house a-smiling all over his face.

"What do you think has happened?" he asks, and then not waiting for me to guess — "Benny Tucker's busted loose," he says, and let out a real whoop of joy. "Yes, sir,

him and Abilene has had a few words and parted and Benny's shook the dust of the valley from his feet for keeps. If you don't believe me go into Mike's and see."

It wasn't that I didn't believe him, but I went over to Mike's right away, and there sure enough was Benny a-sitting at a table by himself in a far corner of the room, a-considerable flushed up but otherwise not showing no signs of what he'd been celebrating with. Being early, there wasn't nobody else in the place except Mike, who was on his way with the bottle and a clean glass.

"One for Mr. Stegg, Mike," says Benny, nodding at me and motioning for me to sit down.

"What's the good word?" I asked him.

"There ain't no good words," he says. "They ain't using them no more where I've been. But it's all in a lifetime and the longer you live the less you learn. Naked I come into the world and now I own this here suit of clothes I'm wearing in fee simple and not no more, except a little loose change I got for my horse a while ago. I'm a-going to herd sheep now and won't need no horse for that. All I'm afraid of is my character ain't good enough for a sheep herder. I've been told so. A lady as good as told me that."

"Tracy just told me he thought there was some trouble betwixt you and Abilene," I says. "I hope it ain't nothing serious.

"Just my way of bursting into song," he explains. "It seems to annoy some folks. Remember when I come and sung Kathleen Mavourneen to you one morning bright and early? Well, you was real peevish about it yourself. Abilene was more so."

"You ain't no great shakes as a singster, Benny," I says. "Still, it don't seem like Kathleen Mavourneen was no just cause or impediment. I forgave you and——"

"It wasn't Kathleen Mavourneen," says Benny. "It was this here"—he cleared his throat and commenced to sing soft and low so's Mike couldn't hear:

"I don't like your familee—
Familee;
They don't make a hit with me—
Hit with me.
I get tired—rather, loaning money to your father
While your poor relations sponge on me.

"Something we'd been discussing put that into my head," he says. "There's more of it:

"I don't think your Uncle John—
Uncle John
Ever had a collar on—
Collar on.
You're a perfect lady, but when I get hitched for life
I'll pick
An or-phan.

"You acquainted with any likely female orphans of marriageable age, Mr. Stegg, sir?"

"Hum!" says I. "So that was it, was it? Just a little thing like that!"

"And a little thing like that was a-plenty," says he.

"She'll get over it," I says.

"Sure," he says. "Give her a little time — about a million years. The trouble is I ain't a-going to get over it — not to the extent of endowing pa with no more of my worldly goods nor cherishing of him in no way, shape or manner. I've got other plans."

"Like endowing Mike Moran," I says. "You're starting well. That's the right idea — showing folks that you're all broke up over this here and don't care two whoops how low-down you get or what becomes of you. Seems like that's all you can do, now that the tuck is took plumb out of you and you ain't got no pretensions to being a man."

"Do you reckon?" he says, giving me an ugly look.

"It seems reasonable, don't it?" I says. "Well, I've got to be getting back to work, not having no blasted hopes to drown in rotgut. So long."

I left him right there, fingering his whisky gass and sort of studying. About ten minutes after that he walks into the livery kind of brisk and with his head up.

"Would you lend me the loan of twenty-five dollars and take chances on getting it back?" he says, looking me straight in the eye.

I went right down after my weasel and gave him what he asked for.

"Now I can soak myself good and plenty inside and out," he says.

"You can," I told him.

"Or I might indulge in a little stud," he says. "Lucky at cards, unlucky in love — ain't that right?"

I told him I'd heard rumors to that effect, and he looked at me kind of curious and walked out and I didn't see him again for nigh on three months. As soon as he left me he

went and bought his horse back and then took the old Indian trail up Beaver and fetched up on the Milk River, where he went to work for a man name of Bradley at foreman's wages. I didn't know about that until he come back though. Once or twice I seen Abilene Pirbright on the street, driving in with pa to see sister Belle, and it struck me she looked mighty big-eyed and white and peaked, and there wasn't no mischief in her smile. It come like it was dragged.

"Heard anything of Benny Tucker since he left?" I asked her one time.

Out went her chin and her eyes struck me as mighty cold and hard.

"I'm glad to say I ain't," she says. "If you have you can keep your news to yourself, Mr. Stegg, please."

"Well, I ain't got any," I says. "I reckon he must have gone back to Texas."

"It looks a heap like rain," she says, and that was all I got.

I made up my mind right there that wherever Benny was he was better off. But it wasn't but a short time after that he walked in on me looking as natural as ever and acting the same, only there was some lines in his face that hadn't been there when he left, and after the first glad greetings was over he seemed kind of older every way. Before I forget, I'll mention that he paid me back what he owed me. He'd done pretty well with Bradley and a side deal in some Oregon ponies that Bradley had helped him to buy. On top of that an uncle of his in Texas had died and left him some money and about a thousand acres of land that he didn't know was any good or not. He aimed to go to Texas

and find out maybe. Maybe he'd stay on at Blueblanket and buy and sell stock. He wasn't dead sure what — only there was one little piece of business here that he calculated to attend to. He had heard that Bert Herndon was infringing on Pass Creek Valley again. Was that so?

I told him that there was reports that Bert had been seen there, which might or might not be true.

"In a general way that ain't no concern of mine," says he. "Still I promised Bert something if he strayed over that way and I'll have to make that boy understand that I keep my promises."

I tried to make him see that there wasn't no use having more trouble. I told him that Abilene hadn't got no earthly use for him, present or absent, and she had got to be fallen off in her looks anyway, and Bert might be the last chance she'd have. But it wasn't no use. He just nodded and rolled him a cigarette, and the first time Bert come to town he lambasted that waddy in a way that wasn't a bruise or broken rib short of shameful. He made Bert another promise after that and Bert must have figured he'd keep it. Anyway Mr. Herndon drew his pay from the Bar T as soon as he was able to travel and he traveled. Johnny Root missed him.

After that business was done Benny buckled down to buying stock here and there, a head or two or three at a time mostly, and shipping when he'd got enough of them for a mess. He was a good buyer and keeping track of the market he done well. He boarded with Ma Frush when he was in town and rented one of her rooms, where he played solitaire most of his evenings. Once in a while he'd come and gas with me, but not often. He'd got kind of thick

with Tracy O'Neill and I guess Tracy saw more of him than what I did. His only other diversions was laying for any new company Abilene happened to get and manhandling them to the best of his ability. Getting shot up once in a while didn't dampen his enthusiasm for this here sport. Charlie Goss put a bullet in his shoulder one time and another time Otis Blanchard come near placing him on file, just grazing his ear and shooting so close he burned Benny's cheek. But neither one of them fellows done much bragging of it. Benny didn't use nothing but his fists, but he was sure efficacious with them.

Him and Abilene met up once in a while. The first time she turned as white as chalk and then flushed scarlet when he looked at her and at pa and at a calf they had in the back of the wagon without no difference in the looks he gave each of them. After that I reckon she braced herself. She wouldn't pretend she didn't see him, but he might have been a hitching post or an empty molasses barrel for all she showed. It was sure kind of pitiful to watch. I mentioned it to Tracy one day and he couldn't help owning that it was a pity.

"My wife says she ain't been like the same girl or much of any kind of girl since they split up," he told me. "I'm afraid Benny has got a hankering after her too, but I hope he don't give in to it. Him beating up them fellows looks bad to me. But I glory in his spunk," he says. "I wish I had some of it myself. Some day maybe I will make a break. Oh, pa and the boys has got 'em hoodooed."

It wasn't long after that, though, that pa missed his step and fell quite a heap in Abilene's esteem. There wasn't no doubt that Benny was making money. Folks talked about it

and old Peemiller at the bank couldn't be too sugary when him and Benny met. Then it got out about Benny's uncle in Texas and all of this got to pa's ears and set him to thinking. One day he come round pumping me, but my valves was dry that day and he didn't get much.

"It's a pity though that him and Abilene had to fuss," says pa. "Abilene is sure quick tempered and she can't take a joke like you and me and she says more than she means sometimes, but that ain't no reason why loving hearts should be sundered. I think a heap of Benny — always did."

I reckon he mistrusted I wouldn't carry the glad tidings to Benny and allowed he'd do it himself and be sure they got to the right party. Where he made his big mistake was having Abilene along. They had come into town on one of their trading trips and pa was just pulling up his team in front of Palmer's grocery when Benny come along with his hat brim drawed down over his eyes. He was a-walking past when pa hailed him.

"Why, hello, Benny!" he says real jovial and hearty. "Getting so proud you won't notice your friends? Why ain't you ever been over to the ranch since you got back to give an account of yourself?"

Benny stopped short in his tracks and looked at him — looked at him like I don't want nobody to look at me.

"I reckon you know why," he says. "Kind of funny for you to ask."

"Shucks!" says pa. "Let bygones be bygones. Hard words don't break no bones, the way I look at it, and I know you didn't mean the half of what you said. Here's Abilene

will tell you the same thing. You two young folks don't want ——"

Abilene had been looking down the street with her underlip clamped tight between her teeth. Right here she cut in:

"You give me the lines and I'll drive on while you get out and lick Mr. Tucker's boots," she says.

Benny turned and looked at her and lifted his hat sober and respectful.

"I hate this on your account, ma'am," he says. "I reckon Mr. Pirbright knows right well I meant what I said. I ain't never changed my mind in regard to him — nor yet in regards to you," he says, looking hard at her. "You remember that part of it too."

She smiled at him — and I don't want no woman to smile at me that-a-way either. Benny lifted his hat again and walked on and Pa Pirbright turned in the wagon seat, his face purple, and shook his fist after him.

"I'll cut your heart out for that, Mr. Tucker," he says under his breath. "I'll cut your heart out and eat it. You wait!"

"You'll cut your regular victuals same as usual and eat them as hearty as if you worked for them," says Abilene.

Pa whirled round on her, but checked up when he seen her face.

I don't know just when it was that talk started about Benny Tucker rustling cattle. It come by degrees — a joking remark here and a hint there — mostly among the stockmen. The big outfits was working together more or less

and I reckon they didn't favor common cow hands that was fired on suspicion setting up for themselves independent. And there was sure signs and tokens of rustling — like there always has been. And innocent folks suspicioned — like there always will be — and a close-mouthed man that ain't sociable and tends to his own business, like Benny had got to be, is as likely to be suspicioned as anybody else. Whether or no, there was talk and it grew and the Pirbright boys and an outfit named Davis at the head of Calico Cañon was a considerable mixed up in the talk about Benny. Some allowed that Benny and the Pirbrights just let on to be on bad terms as a blind — plumb foolishness, but that was the talk for quite a while.

Then one cloudy afternoon Jim Harmon, the sheriff, walked a-past the stable arm in arm with Mitchell Pirbright, with a few foot-loose citizens of Blueblanket trailing along behind. Mitchell's right hand was wrapped round with a red handkerchief and stuck in the bosom of his shirt. He was grinning, but it didn't look natural. Then him and Jim turned into Doc Ammerman's office and when they come out they went on up to the jail. Seemed like Mitchel and two other boys was engaged in cutting up a steer that morning and Harmon and a couple of deputies happened along kind of all at once and unexpected and asked them to put up their hands. Mitchell didn't put his high enough and Harmon's second shot got Mitchell's trigger guard and trigger finger and lodged in the palm of his hand. The two deputies must have got buck fever. Anyway they had running marks to shoot at and the marks got to their horses and kept right on a-running and got clear away, the both of them. That was all there was to it — excepting ——

Well, it gave folks something to talk about. Along about eight o'clock Pa Pirbright come into town from the valley with Magdalena and Sacora and Endora and young Dave and they all went up to Tracy O'Neill's house without stopping. Ten minutes after they got there Tracy come out in a hurry and talking to himself and the heavenly powers and headed for town and went up to his office and locked the door. All a body could make out was he'd lit a lamp. Then a bulletin come into Mike's that pa had gone up to the jail as a visitor, and finally there was another report that the deputies had arrested a Davis boy and Benny Tucker over at Buffalo Gap.

Just about that time about ten billion tons of black powder was touched off somewheres overhead, seemed like, and all the water in the world that wasn't being used for oceans and creeks and such begun to come down on a large section of the foothills country with a hurrah. Right away public interest was turned to getting home as dry as possible and setting the tubs out under the eaves. I made a quick run over to the stable and let the boy go that I'd left in charge. Then I sat down with my pipe and studied over happenings between claps of thunder and the darndest lightning ever I see. I didn't take a heap of stock in the report that Benny had been arrested, account of seeing Benny go into Ma Frush's for supper after he'd left his horse with me. He couldn't have got a third of the way to the Gap, even with the horse, no matter how much he wanted to get arrested. But it looked like there was trouble ahead for the Pirbright family, especially if Tracy O'Neill kicked out on defending Mitchell, which I judged he had.

From where I sat I could see the light still burning in

Tracy's office over the hardware store after eleven o'clock, and once I put on a slicker intending to go over there and break in on the boy's meditations, but as soon as I put my nose outside the drive of the rain and the rush of the new-born Main Street river sort of discouraged me. Still some way I didn't feel like going to bed, but I must have dozed off just the same, because the first thing I knew was somebody a-rapping on the window with the head of a quirt and a horse's hoofs stomping round on the plank sidewalk. I got up and throwed the door open and in rides a woman drenched and running streams from every tag and end of her and her horse. I held up the lantern, and lo and behold, it was Abilene Pirbright!

"I'm all right now, Mr. Stegg," she says. "Don't ask me no question, please. I just rode in from the valley — on some particular business. I know you'll do me a favor, won't you?"

She couldn't have asked me one I wouldn't have done — not in that pitiful trembly voice. I told her so.

"But you'll catch your death, honey," I says. "Let me take you up to your sister Belle's — the rest of your folks is up there."

"It's Tracy I want to see," she says. "I seen a light in his office as I come a-past, but I'm afraid pa is in there, or some of the boys. Will you come over with me and go up first and if pa's there call Tracy out? Now — right away!"

I wouldn't right away. Nor I wouldn't let her. I made her come into the office first and choke down a drop of something I kept in case of sickness and it done her good.

"Now about dry clothes," I says.

"Don't be foolish," she says with a flash of temper. "If you don't want to go with me I'll go alone."

I pulled a fur coat down from a peg.

"This will keep you from chilling anyway," I says, and held it out. Just as she was putting her arms in the sleeves she stopped.

"Whose coat is that?" she asked.

I told her it belonged to a friend of mine who wouldn't mind her using it and as I was getting a spare slicker to throw over it I saw her lay her cheek for a moment against the old wolfskin. Then I put on a slicker myself and we waded to Tracy's and she stood in the hallway while I went up the stairs and knocked at Tracy's door after I found it locked. I had to knock two or three times.

"What the devil do you want this time in the morning?" asks Tracy, when he opened the door.

"Nothing much," I says. I looked at the open books on the table. The room was thick with smoke and Tracy had a long stogy in his mouth in full blast. The door of the little private room at the back was shut, I noticed.

"I thought Mr. David Pirbright, Senior, might be here," I says.

"I guess he knows better than that," Tracy snaps. "This office is one good place not to waste time looking for Pirbrights from this on. You might try my happy home. Look in the best bed there is in the house. If pa's there that's where you'll find him."

"I don't need him," I says. "I've got a caller here for you — on business."

I walked to the door intending to call Abilene, but she had already come up. When I opened it she walked in. Tracy

was a considerable took aback, but he braced up and scowled at her.

"It ain't no use, Abilene," he said. "You might as well save your breath. They've all been at me and Belle says she'll get a divorce, but I've told 'em I'm through, and I am. You get out of here like a good girl, because I ain't going to listen to you."

"Excuse me, Tracy," I says. "I don't want to seem officious or arrogant, but you're a-going to listen as long as she wants to talk and I'm right here to see that you do. Here's a girl that's just rode sixteen miles at black midnight through this devil's brew of a storm and over a road that forked off right or left into eternity every hundred yards or less. She does that all by herself, without no regard for life or limb, to speak for her own flesh-and-blood brother and you tell her you won't listen to her. Oh, I reckon you will!"

"You don't say you rode in from the ranch!" says Tracy. "Why, Abilene, you poor, fool girl — and you're wet as a drowned rat! What did you do it for?"

"Not on Mitchell's account," says Abilene. "I'll tell you that to start with. I wouldn't walk ten steps on a bright summer day to save him from being sent up for twenty years. Now don't you fuss about me being wet. I'm warm in this coat. You just pay attention to what I'm saying. It's Benny Tucker I want to keep out of jail and it's my own father and brothers that has been fixing up a dirty lying scheme to put him there."

We was certainly struck of a heap — I was. Tracy was the first to speak.

"Some folks had better stay where they happen to be until they're called on," he says.

"I'm not that way," says Abilene. "When Crawford got to bragging after the folks had gone, and let it out, I wasn't going to wait to be called. He tried to stop me and I took a stick of stove wood to him, if you want to know, and if he's hurt bad it's his own fault. And I pushed ma into her room and locked the door," she says. "I saw her getting through the window by the first flash of lightning just as I started, but all that doesn't matter. What pa and the boys cooked up was to butcher a steer out on the range and go off leaving it as if they had got scared, and whoever come up and found it would find Benny's old wagon that he loaned to pa a year ago standing close by and Benny's Billy horse that Val borrowed from him and got all sore backed so's Bennie had to turn him loose on the range tied up to the wagon wheel along with the Oregon horse that he rode in from Milk River. They'd catched up that horse, too, and they'd dumped Benny's saddle in the wagon, the one he'd let Mitchell have and Mitchell never gave back — and there would be a knife of Benny's stuck in the steer. The devils!

"Well, it seems like they hadn't figured on Sheriff Harmon slipping up on them and so Mitchell got shot up and they nearly got Val and Lem Davis. But they're going to hang it on to Benny, just the same, if they can — a man that's as straight as a string and never did a crooked thing or spoke a crooked word in his life!"

"Lay low!" says Tracy. "I mean, how do you know he ain't crooked? There's been talk of him rustling, I can tell you that."

"If he's crooked there ain't no straight nowhere," says Abilene. "If he's a thief I wouldn't trust the Angel Gabriel with a copper cent. If he's a liar the truth ain't never been spoke. He may have been a fool for ever mixing himself up with the Pirbrights on account of a girl that wasn't worth a second thought from a man like him, but he's got bravely over that, and I — I deserve it. If you're against him just say so, but I give you notice right now that I'm on his side while there's breath in my body and against kin and ——"

She stopped and gave a little scream.

The door of Tracy's private room had opened and out walked Benny Tucker.

"I ain't a-going to stay where I happen to be until I'm called on and I ain't a-going to lay low no longer," he says to Tracy.

Then he walked up to Abilene and caught her in his arms.

"On my side and by my side from this on," he says.

In a moment or so he looked back at us over his shoulder.

"You two ain't needed here for a while," he told us. "We've got things to say."

"So have I," says Tracy coolly. "And not much time to say them," he says. "You sit down in that chair, Abilene, and Benny, you sit here on this side of the table. Well, sit where you like, but pay attention to me. The rest of that will have to keep. Abilene, you ain't chilling in them wet clothes?"

She certainly didn't look as if she was and she said she wasn't. She was a-glowing like a June rose and I'd have sworn she was five years younger than she had been five minutes before. She showed Benny the coat she was wear-

ing, pushing her little hand out of the sleeve. Benny took it and kissed it.

"When you're ready, I'll begin," says Tracy, and they turned to him, but they kept hand in hand.

"I know all you told me," says Tracy to Abilene. "Sheriff Harmon told me about the wagon and the horses and all the rest of it, and what's more, Mitchell has made a confession implicating Benny, and Val and Lem Davis bear him out. They've got Wirtz, the Dutch butcher at Buffalo Gap, to testify that Benny told him he was a-going to have some meat for him cheap, but he was to keep his head closed about it. The boys thought the steer belonged to Benny and he hadn't had time to vent it. Benny was the brains and they was the poor but honest dupes."

"See here," says Benny, "all this is plumb foolishness, because ——"

"Keep still!" Tracy barked at him. "I'm doing the talking." He shook his finger in Benny's face. "I say it looks mighty bad for you; I say the evidence is clear against you; I say Sheriff Harmon thinks so and I say that if you're here you'll be arrested the first thing in the morning — this morning, by Godfrey! And if the case comes to trial, you'll go over the road. Who knows about this, you or me?"

"But —" Benny begins.

"I say, keep your mouth shut," Tracy roared. "What was you going to say, my dear?" he asks Abilene.

"I can prove that they made it all up between them to get Benny into trouble," she says, white and trembling again.

Tracy smiled at her sadly.

"Oh, no, you can't," he says. "What you have is just

hearsay, not proof. Your word against theirs, and they'll outswear you. No, I'm afraid Benny is due to spend a year or two behind the bars. I've been advising him to leave the country, but he's obstinate and he won't go, he says — didn't you, Benny?"

He gave Benny a queer look and a quick wink and Abilene turned her head.

"Why wouldn't you, Benny?" she asked him.

"I could stand Harmon off if once Benny got clear of town," says Tracy. "He could go to Texas and stay there. I could look after his interests here. He could make the morning train east at Hermosilla if he could find somebody to drive him over there. But he's mule-headed."

"Why won't you go, Benny darling?" she asks him.

"And leave you?" he says.

"Would you want me to go along with you?" she asked.

Tracy got up.

"Come on, Stegg," he says to me. "I can't stand this."

And with that we went out and left them to say the things they had to say and hurried over to the stable. It had quit raining and the stars was shining above the false dawn. Tracy laughed and thumped me on the back and I thumped him.

"Funny how that come out," he says. "Benny and I were talking all this mess over and when you knocked he thought it might be pa and went into the back room. I didn't lie to Abilene either — not much. Pa and Mitchell and the rest is sure trying to hang it onto Benny, but the tangle of stories they're telling is plumb ridiculous. Harmon laughed his sides sore telling me about it. Mitchell will go this time, and Crawford and Val, too, and two of the

Davis gang. Maybe Wirtz. Wirtz has forgot the conversation he didn't have with Benny already though. Young Dave will probably behave himself and pa's harmless and the girls will both marry off before long. So I'm free and this time next year I'll be in the legislature — maybe! Yippee! Get the stoutest team you've got and the strongest double-seat rig. The roads will be pretty tough between here and Hermosilla.

"Better throw in a spade and an ax — and hustle!"

"You going along?" I asked as I walked the team out.

"Cert!" says he. "Got to get 'em married before train time and I may have to get Benny some currency. He had figured on the trip to Texas and back anyway, and he may be heeled, but maybe not. And Abilene will have to buy her some duds. I'm going to tell her that she can't write home from Texas, account of putting the bloodhounds of the law on Benny's track," he giggled. "Hustle, or somebody may wake up and tell her that the boy ain't in no danger."

"There's one thing I'm afraid of," I says as I hooked the check reins. "Benny may get mad at her some time in the dim after years and throw her family in her face. That's all I see threatening a long and happy married life for them."

"You know that uncle of Benny's?" says Tracy. "He didn't die — not to say die."

"No?" I says, considerable took aback.

"No," says Tracy. "They hung him for stealing horses."

VII

TOBERMORY

JIMMY GOOD-VOICE-FLUTE had been pestering the trader for gratuitous cigarettes for at least half an hour after he had got all that was coming to him for his beaver pelts, and when he surreptitiously slipped a dollar-and-fifty-cent skinning knife under his blanket and tried to look innocent the trader's patience gave out completely. The old bullwhacker watched the ensuing action with grave interest, and even left his seat on a nail keg by the stove to view the continuation of the proceedings 'outside the store. He viewed them from the inside, however, through a clear patch that he rubbed on the frost-covered window, first closing the door to keep out the zero cold.

It was an interesting spectacle. It takes an active and speedy white person to keep within kicking distance of a running Oglala Indian in the prime of life and good condition. To actually kick him three times and make up the ground lost on each occasion, which the trader did, constitutes a record performance. The course ran over ground covered with a light snow, around the hay corral and to the steep bank overhanging the creek, Jimmy demonstrating the aptness of the first two-thirds of his family name as they went. The trader stopped at the creek bank; the Indian went on, down and through.

When the breathless advance agent of commerce returned the old bullwhacker complimented him on his form, but deprecated his violence.

"I was something of a foot racer myself when I was some younger," he said, "but I don't believe I'd have allowed you much of a handicap. Nevertheless, Ike, a man hadn't ought to let his heels outrun his head like you done. I reckon it's no more than natural and human for to feel a mite peevish once in a spell. We can't all be like Old Man Tobermory, but we can smother our honest feelings, sort of — or we ought to could — when it ain't to our interest to show 'em."

"Who's Tobermory?" inquired the trader, picking up the skinning knife and returning it to stock.

"When Young-Man-Afraid-of-the-Soap has got you knotted up in rawhide and wired to a sapling you'll be sorry for this," pursued the old bullwhacker, shaking his head with much seriousness. "When the squaws are singing happy little songs as they stick lighted pine splinters into your shrinking form you'll be a-cursing of the day when you humbled the haughty spirit of the noble red man."

"Who's Tobermory?" repeated the trader.

"When the Badface band exhumes the tomahawk and the shrill warwhoops is a-ringing through the forest aisles you'll regret that you hadn't extended the right hand of fellowship to him instead of the sole of your number nine," the old bullwhacker went on. "An Injun has got his feelings, the same as you and me, and you injured that one in a tender and sensitive spot, Ike."

"I aimed to," replied the trader. "Who ——"

"You've just about forfeited his friendship," sighed the old bullwhacker. "He won't be easy now until he's got red hair hanging in his tepee. Is this here shack insured?"

"You never stopped to listen when folks got to talking about me," remarked the trader. "I come into the Mandan Territory before I growed hair of any color at all, and I was eating baled hay without spitting out the wire before I was three years old. All I wear boots for is the looks of the thing. Who was Tobermory? I was asking you."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," said the old bullwhacker. "Well, he was a man that wouldn't never have treated nobody the way you done a while ago. He was mild and gentle in his ways, Old Man Tobermory was. Moses wasn't nothing to him for meekness, and he claimed that Job, seemed like to him, was a lee-eetle mite disposed to kick on slight provocation. Not that he wanted to criticize Mr. Job or be finding fault with him, but — well, it seemed like Satan might have made out a tolerable case against him if he had wanted to bad enough. 'Still,' says Tobermory, 'I got to own that I never had no boils myself on me.' Then he strokes his old gray whiskers all the way down from his chin to the buttons on his pants. 'I reckon mabbe it's because I've always et a heap of corn bread and sorghum molasses with the rest of my victuals; what do you reckon? How does a fellow go about it to get boils, anyway? I'd like to try 'em.' You see he sort of prided himself on being patient.

"Well, he come into the territory from Missouri or Iowa or somewheres — him and his old woman and the two boys — and they settled on the Belle Fourche, near where the Gooseneck Ranch was. If you'll believe me he broke forty-

odd acres of sod with a yoke of balky steers and never said a word out of the way. What's more, he kept good friends with the man who sold him them steers and told him they'd pull the tongue out of a wagon — friends with him for years after. Lent him money, by Godfrey!"

"Did you ever pay him back?" inquired the trader.

"Do you want to hear about this?" demanded the old bullwhacker. "All right then! One day he went out to the pasture where he'd had ten head of three-year-old colts and found the fence wire cut and the colts gone.

"'Too bad!' he says. 'Too bad! Well, the Lord gave, and the Lord taketh away. I ain't got no kick coming.'

"His biggest boy, Arch, who was with him, was nosing round the tracks where the wire was cut. 'The Lord didn't take 'em away,' says Arch. 'It was a couple of sons-of guns riding half-shod ponies. See if it wasn't! And they headed straight for no place they could ride round that was anyways populous, the way their trail runs. I reckon we might tag along after them, just out of curiosity, paw. You fog along and I'll go to the house and get you a gun and overtake you.'

"'What do I want with a gun?' asks Tobermory. 'This ain't the Fourth of July for to make a joyful noise, and we ain't out after meat. I'm sorry to see you getting notions like that into your head, sonny. If them Sabeans need them colts worse than what I do they're welcome to them; but I don't know that it wouldn't be just as well to explain to them that I'm a poor man and leave it to their better feelings whether it wouldn't be the right thing for them to let us take 'em back — if we catch up with them.'

"'All right, pappy,' says Arch. 'If you'd sooner talk

'em to death than kill 'em outright I'm agreeable. I guess they deserve it — the naughty, bad, wicked things! I don't blame you for feeling sort of vindictive.'

"'Why, Archie!' says Tobermory. 'Why, boy, I ain't feeling a particle vindictive. I can't figure how in time you should think such a thing as that of me. No, I ain't mad at 'em. All I said was that I'd tell 'em how things was with me. They hadn't ought to mind that. Do you reckon they'd mind — if I just told 'em? You know we really do need them colts, Archie. 'Course we could get along without 'em, but ——'

"Arch had got too far ahead to hear good, so he stopped talking and followed along the trail, which was tolerable plain so that the boy was making right good time. It was all Tobermory could do to keep him in sight. The balance of the morning they rode about south and an hour after noon they come into sight of Bear Butte and pretty soon Arch pulled up at the top of a rise.

"'Look over there,' he says, pointing with his finger, and there about a mile away they made out a bunch of horses and some men milling round under some cottonwoods.

"'There's more than ten head there, and there's more than two men,' says Tobermory; and then he seen that Arch had got a little Spencer carbine under his leg and was pulling it out. 'I'd like for you to put that back, Archie,' he says. 'Remember, them that takes the sword shall perish by the sword, and the same applies to guns. I didn't see you had that when we started or I'd have asked you to leave it at home.'

"'We might as well go back then,' says Arch, reining round. 'I feel bashful when I met a bunch of perfect

strangers and ain't properly attired and fixed up like other men; and I bet that every last one of them fellows is wearing the very latest styles in artillery and has got 'em on straight. Let's go home, pappy.'

"'All right, son,' says Tobermory. 'Tell ma to set out a bite for me on the table and not to wait up.' Saying which he trots along toward the cottonwoods. Arch made a move to pull out the carbine again, but he was a good boy and 'most always done what his daddy told him, so he just cussed a streak and then put out after the old gentleman; and they both arrived together, just at the same time that Black Jack Frushin kicked his last at the looped end of a rope that was slung over a limb of one of the trees.

"The party consisted of Alonzo Dolby and his merry little band of stranglers, who had accidentally happened on Frushin and a partner of his, name of Gus Minnick, who was driving four other horses besides the Tobermory ten, all with brands that wasn't vented, and no good excuse. They had give the boys a fair — well, a fair-to-middling trial, and had got as far as one up and one to play when the Tobermorys come up and sort of diverted attention.

"Dolby knew Old Man Tobermory and gave him glad welcome. 'If we had known you was coming we'd have sure delayed the performance,' he says; 'but you can have a seat for the second act, which is just a-going to begin.'

"'Do you mean to tell me that you've hung that poor boy just because he had a few cayuses that didn't properly belong to him?' says Tobermory in horror-struck tones.

"Dolby said he sort of reckoned that they had, kind of, and asked him what was his own opinion about it, judging from the looks of the late Mr. Frushin.

"Old Man Tobermory wagged his head mighty sorrowful. 'And do you mean to say that you're figuring on hanging that one too?' he asks, pointing with his finger to Gus Minnick, who was all wound round and waiting.

"'You might say we got definite intentions bordering on decisions thataway,' Dolby told him. 'You see, Tobe,' he says, 'we've got to do something to show that we ain't approving this here promiscuous stock-rustling and general helling round. We don't want the idea to get out that we don't take a warm and practical interest in good morals. We aim to be an uplifting and elevating force in the community, and we will now proceed to uplift and elevate Brother Minnick.'

"'Hold on, 'Lonzo!' says Tobermory. 'I just want to say a word or two before you do anything rash. You ain't agoing to improve no man's morals by treating him as if he was a family wash. Once you've hung him you've spoiled all his chances for future usefulness. He ain't going to distinguish himself in no walk of life you can mention, from that out, the way I look at it. And what's more, it ain't kind or considerate, noways. You wouldn't like it yourself. No, sir! None of you gentlemen wouldn't. I don't claim it's the right thing to go round gathering up folks' horses without asking or saying something about it; but I don't believe Mr. Minnick here has had the advantages that some of us has had, and I believe he's sorry right now that he done so. And I think if you asked him he'd promise that he wouldn't do it no more — wouldn't you, Mr. Minnick? You think it over and you'll see that you've done wrong. You don't aim to do wrong, do you?'

"Minnick looked up at Dolby. 'Do I have to take this

as well?' he asks. 'Ain't this against the constitution providing against cruel and unusual punishments? It's all right, I suppose, if you say so. You've got me tied.'

"'I told you so, pappy,' whispers Arch, nudging the old man.

"'You hush, son!' says Tobermory. 'I reckon he thinks I'm making sport of him, which sure would be a cruelty and which I wouldn't do and ain't. 'Lonzo, you turn this boy loose and I'll take him back to the ranch with me where he won't be led astray by bad company and will have good books and moral influences and steady work and wages and regular square meals. I've got a heap of faith in this boy. If I was a betting man I'd be willing to bet I can reform him, even if appearances is against him now.'

"'We'd like to oblige you, Tobe,' says Dolby, 'but you're a heap too hopeful. All said and done, Mr. Minnick is a horse thief.'

"'All said and done, they're mostly my horses,' says Tobermory. 'If I'm willing to overlook it I guess you gentlemen ought to be. Now I'd just like to say a few words to prove that I'm right about this.'

"'For the love of heaven, let him take the dirty son-of-a-gun!' says one of the party. 'A few words is good with me, and he's sure said 'em aplenty. I like to see a good lively hanging as well as the next fellow, but I ain't agoing to hold out for it if Mr. Tobermory is agoing to object at any more length.'

"That got another man started. Seemed like Minnick had shot off the tip of his ear and the soreness had worked all through his system. He expressed himself according,

and then Gus chirped up and told him that his ears was too long anyway. 'You certainly couldn't expect me to shoot you in the brain,' says Gus.

"'Now don't you boys get to fussing and quarreling,' says Tobermory. 'It ain't seemly. Gus, you poor, misguided fellow, are you willing to come home with me and behave yourself?'

"'Suits me,' says Gus.

"'There you are!' says Old Man Tobermory, as pleased as pie. 'He says he'll behave himself, and what more could you ask?'

"So, after a little more, back and forth, they untied Gus, and him and the old man and Arch and the colts started back. Gus acted kind of quiet and thoughtful for a spell. They had gone four or five miles before he spoke. Then he says to Old Man Tobermory: 'You was mentioning wages a while back. How much do you reckon you want to pay me, Mister Man?'

"Arch heard him. 'Why, you slit-eyed, crooked-nosed, small-souled, bandy-legged blister!' says he. 'I've a notion to drag you out of that saddle and jam you a yard and a half into the ground. Wages!'

"Gus slid his hand down to his hip before he took time to think that it was waste motion. Then he remembered that 'Lonzo Dolby had forgot to return him the personal property that he was reaching for, and spurred off to one side to avoid the rush that Arch started to make. Old Man Tobermory edged in between them pretty lively and told Arch to behave.

"'I'm perfectly ashamed of you, son,' he said. 'I don't know what on earth Mr. Minnick is agoing to think of

such manners — talking about a gentleman's features and limbs, what he ain't noways to blame for, right to his face! Why, you act as if you'd never had no raising. You excuse him, Mr. Minnick; he doesn't mean no harm; he's just young and thoughtless. You and him is agoing to be the best kind of friends or I miss my guess.'

"'You miss it about a statutory mile if he ever makes them kind of cracks again,' says Gus. 'Such language applied to me 'most always occasions a coolness in the applicationer sort of approximating the temperature of a wedge. If I hadn't a high respect for you I'd be miffed about it as it is.'

"'You apologize, Archie,' says Tobermory. 'You apologize, like a good boy.'

"'Sure,' says Arch, with a sweet, dutiful smile. 'I done wrong, pa. Mr. Minnick, I hope you'll overlook it. I wouldn't sleep more than twelve hours at a stretch if I thought I'd really hurt your tender feelings and got you to disliking me. I apologize. Sure! I'd apologize to a polecat — any polecat — to please pa.'

"'Now that's handsome,' says Tobermory, with his crinkled-up, benevolent grin. 'That's more like my boy Archie. Now about them wages: I'm willing to pay what's fair — thirty-five a month; and if we do well and don't have no losses I'll raise it at the end of the season.'

"'Well, that ain't much,' says Gus; 'but I've took a fancy to you, and then you done me a favor a little while ago, so if your old woman ain't no more than an average bad cook I'll help you out.'

"'I feel sure that ma'll do her level best to please you, since you're so kind and obliging,' says Arch. 'Any time

the grub is cold you just tell me and I'll make it hot for you. I'll make it so damned hot for you ——'

"'Archie!" says the old man.

"'Yes, I see that me and Archie is agoing to be the best kind of friends,' says Gus, and his eyes was slittier than ever when he said it.

"Now I take the same view of human nature as Tobermory," observed the old bullwhacker. "I claim there's some good in most folks if we could only find it. The trouble is that we don't look hard enough. Ain't that right? Tobermory figured that Gus had just mislaid his redeeming qualities, but they was in him somewheres, hid away under a mess of orneriness where nobody'd ever guess they could have been put. Him being about two-thirds granger, he looked on Gus as a barren forty and proceeded to water him with words of wisdom and fertilize him with forgiveness and warm his soil with sunny smiles, all the time a-scattering seeds of kindness and going down on all fours to see if some of them wasn't beginning to sprout. You try that on some of your Injun brothers some time, Ike, and see if it don't pay. I read once about a kind-hearted old settler who found a poor starving redskin out in the snow and took him into his humble cabin and fed him up a lot and warmed him and turned him loose with a grub-stake, and years after ——"

"Years ago, you was speaking of Tobermory," hinted the trader.

"Well, Gus didn't seem to sprout worth a cent," the old bullwhacker resumed. "About that time I lived neighbors to the Tobermorys — not more than twelve miles away —

and Arch Tobermory used to happen along once in a while and unload his mind concerning Gus and the old man. I used to like to listen to Arch. He had a natural gift for language that he had to keep under a bushel, as you might say, while he was round home, account of the old man. You don't often run across sons like Archie. He was different to the most. He couldn't help feeling that Gus was this, that and the other, and he thought that his old daddy was doomed to a heap of disappointment in his plans for reform; but he walked wide of Gus for the most part and only let himself out when he was alone, according to what he said, except once or twice, and when Tobermory wasn't round. I reckon that was the truth. As for Tobermory himself:

"'Bless his dear old whiskers!' says Arch to me. 'He's dead certain that he's going to make that libel on a decent hyena over into a model for the young. He thinks he can sweeten the mess of meanness until it's fit to fill scent sachets and put in bureau drawers. You can't tell pa that a rattlesnake with a sore tummy ain't no fit playmate for the children; he won't believe you. He smokes his darned old pipe and tells me to be patient like he is. If you ask me, I'm a surprise to myself, considering how the color of Gus' hair annoys me; but all I can do is stay round and see that the gentleman doesn't burn the house up some fine night. You wait, though! Yes, he mighty nigh crisped us already. Give me half a chance and I'll sure reach out and wipe that smut off the nose of Creation!'

"'I believe you are sort of prejudiced against him,' I says. 'There's no telling but your daddy may soften him yet, hard as he is.'

"'I'd like to soak him good and see what that would do,' says Arch, sort of studying. 'The only other way I know to soften that asafetida pill is to pound him into a pulp.'

"I said I should have thought that he would forget himself some odd time and eradicate the son-of-a-gun.

"'Pa always watches out for that,' says Arch. 'I might slip past the old gent,' he says, 'but it would be like killing a good neighbor's worthless pet dog because he showed his teeth at you. Pa would never get over it.'

"'Didn't you never tell Gus about how he reminds you of all them members of the animal kingdom?' I asks him.

"'I've mentioned it to him in private; but then I'm keeping the guns locked up, and he knows that if I once laid hands on him I'd pull him apart and take chances on being able to put him together again,' says Arch. 'He's tried to assassinate me by accident a couple of times and I have to watch him close, but otherwise our relations is cordial. I keep thinking that he'll run to the end of the picket rope and throw himself, but it begins to look doubtful. The other day he got mad with the best cow we've got because she switched her tail in his face, so he ups with the milk stool and busts her head wide open. Pa did tell him that wasn't no way to act, but he told him more in sorrow than in anger, and Gus overlooked the seeming harshness of the remark when he seen how pa regretted it.'

"'It certainly was hasty of Gus,' says I. 'I think I'd have remonstrated a few myself. Did he kill the cow?'

"'Her hide is on the fence and her meat is salted down for the winter,' says Arch. 'Then, the day before yesterday — I guess you seen the smoke — he set the grass afire down the valley where we was agoing to cut hay next week.

There ain't no kind of work Gus hates worse than haying, and there ain't none that he likes any better. All is, we'll have to buy hay this fall or let the stock rustle through the winter. If I had catched him there would have been some eradicating done right there, but it was pa happened along while he was touching her off in the third place. Pa spoiled his coat and singed off a considerable whisker trying to put the fire out, but the wind got the start of him.'

"'I suppose pa made allowances for him,' says I.

"'The low-flung liar said that he done it for a joke on the grasshoppers,' says Arch. 'He claimed that he never thought about the hay once. Of course pa had to own up that anybody was liable to forget once in a while, but he did hope that Gus would try to be more thoughtful.'

"You'd have thought, being as uncharitable as tinkling cymbals, that Gus would have took a chance and a few horses and lit out, after a general massacre of the Tobermory family; but 'Lonzo Dolby had passed word about him to all the ranches and the stock-association men, and as the Kansas rustlers was somewhat active about that time 'Lonzo had his scouts pretty well organized, particularly in the dark of the moon; so, altogether, the chance was a slim one. Arch figured it out that way at first, but later on he come round to my opinion that Gus was softening. For a while, I don't deny, the old man's proteege acted up real aggravating; trying to teach little Sammy Tobermory to swear and chew tobacco premature, as you might say, before them accomplishments was proper and befitting. That looked like pure devilment; but it may have been ignorance. And taking Mis' Tobermory's gold watch and the brooch that

had her grandfather's hair into it and trading them to a whisky peddler and then getting himself intoxicated and cutting down the three-year-old apple orchard that was just getting ready to bear — that was another thing.

"'And all pa does is fill up a bucket with rich orient pearls and tote them out to his trough,' says Arch. 'Ma's talking of packing up and going back East to her folks with little Sammy,' he says. 'Pa tells her that if she feels that way and won't be persuaded he can't stop her, but it's his duty to be patient with Gus and what would the boy do if there wasn't nobody to give him a helping hand. "It's a cinch that he'd help himself," says ma. You see Gus undertook to grease the wagon the other day, and he wiped the thimbles off with ma's best petticoat that was hanging to sun, because it saved him walking all the way to the barn for a piece of old gunny sack.'

"But, as I say, things begun to change. 'The constant drip of water wears away the hardest stone,' as the fellow says, and, along come fall, Gus begun to act more like the common run of humanity. Aside from feeding bread and strychnine to some of the chickens — which may have been out of scientific interest — and a few things like that, he didn't do nothing out of reason, and he begun to quit insulting the old man and trying to kill Arch. Arch owned up that he had turned his back more than once without anything happening — as long as a minute at a time. He told me that Gus had toted in a pail of water for Mis' Tobermory without even being asked and shucked half a wagonload of squaw corn the same day. Pa sent him to town instead of Arch and he come back you might say sober, and with all the mail.

"'That's right good news,' I says. 'If your daddy doesn't take all the cussedness out of him he'll go to the United States Senate yet.'

"'It begins to look thataway,' says Arch, sort of looking down his nose and fetching a deep sigh.

"'Ain't you glad?' I asks him. 'You don't act like it,' I says.

"'Sure I'm glad!' says he, but he didn't look like it.

"'Certainly, I'm tickled 'most to pieces,' he busts out again after a little. 'Why wouldn't I be pleased to see a fellow creature a-turning from the paths of gall and bitterness and walking in the straight and narrow way that leadeth unto a good team and wagon and a cow not to speak of summer's wages all winter. That's what pa is figuring on giving him to start him on a ranch, and I wouldn't be surprised if he raised the bid before spring. Yes, sir, Gus allows he'll settle down on a claim somewheres near us so's he can get over often to see pa and get the benefit of his advice. You bet I'm plumb joyful about it.'

"Well, there it was; and I ain't got the slightest doubt but if nothing hadn't happened to the contrary Gus would have settled down and him and Arch would have been like brothers, same as the old man had said they would be. I kept on thinking thataway for about a week after Arch went away, quirting his horse for shying at the gatepost—'which wasn't like my boy Archie,' as Old Man Tobermory used to say. I made allowances, because I knew that all along the youngster had figured that sometime he'd get to crawl Mr. Minnick's hump for reasons that his daddy couldn't kick at, and here was Mr. Minnick blasting that sweet hope with a short fuse and a double shot of virtuousness.

"Well, I reckon it was about two weeks after that when Arch come back again. It was one of these here bright clear mornings 'when all Nature seems to smile,' as the fellow says. Like in the month of May when the lambs did skip and play and the birds was a-singing to a charm — only some colder, and it wasn't the birds a-singing. I'd just stepped to the door to throw out my dishwater when I heard a song that wasn't never rendered by nothing that wore feathers. It come clear and strong on the morning breeze, with happy yelps on the high notes like a timber wolf a-serenading the amber moon:

"'With my hippy, hippy, hippy,
And my hippy, hippy, hi;
With my hippy, hippy, hippy,
Ya-hoo-oo ee-ee — ha-ay ——'

"And here comes Arch Tobermory, loping along over the trail, beating time with his hat on his horse's neck. He stopped singing when he seen me and pulled his horse in to a walk, and when he got up to where I was his face was as long as a fiddle.

"'How, colah!' I says. 'If you ain't emptied the bottle I don't mind if I do join you, early as it is,'

"'I forget once in a while,' says Arch, sort of sheepish, as he followed me in. 'No, I ain't got none and ain't had none,' he says. 'Ho hum! I just forget.

"'With my hip ——'

"'Doggone it! Somebody ought to kick me good. It's a world of sorrow, Uncle Billy. We're here to-day and

gone to-morrow — like the flowers that bloom in the spring and is cut down, as pappy says.

"'With my hippy ——'

"'Oh, shucks! Have you got the makings, Uncle Billy? Poor pappy! Poor pappy!'

"'What's the matter with him?' I asks. I was kind of worried at the curious way Arch was acting. 'He ain't sick, is he?' I asks.

"'Why, it ain't him; it's Gus,' says Arch. 'Poor Gus! If you've got a stock of this smoking I'll take a sack home to pappy. That's what I come for. Yes,' he says, lighting his cigarette and dragging on it kind of ravenous, 'poor Gus has left us, poor Gus has.'

"I asked him how that come.

"'Well, the old gent sent him to town again,' says Arch. 'He was to have been back the next morning, but he claimed he met a friend. If that was so I don't blame him for staying three days to enjoy the novelty, but it seems to me hard to believe. But he come back. Pa had been real uneasy for them three days, but he wouldn't let me ride over and borrow from you. "I've got faith in that boy," he kept saying. "He'll be back any minute now. You can't tell me that he ain't got a single spark of gratitude in him, after all I've done for him. He wouldn't cause me anguish and suffering all this time if something hadn't happened to him. But I look for him any minute. He's good at heart, Gus is."

"'Well, finally Gus did come. I don't blame pa the least in the world, mind. If that ax hadn't been right handy —— I don't know. It takes a heap to get pa started, but he's

sure hard to stop when he really moves — and sudden. Mighty spry for a man of his age. I was proud of him! Ho hum! Yes, we laid Gus where the waving willows grow.'

"I stared at him. I says: 'You don't mean to say that your pa — Samuel J. Tobermory ——'

"Arch nodded. 'Yes,' says he, 'with the ax.

"'With my hippy, hippy ——'

"'Oh, sugar! Yes, pa said that he'd stood a good deal from Gus and had been forbearing and long-suffering and lenient all that could be expected, but when the thankless whelp come back without the smoking tobacco he thought it was just a lee-eetle too much. Well, I've got to be going or pa'll get anxious about me.'

"He jumps up and jams my good tobacco down in his pocket and busts through the door in a hurry.

"'Poor Gus!' he says as he throws his leg over the saddle. Then he went off on the keen run, into the golden glory of the morn, a-splashing the dancing, rippling water of the ford into bright-hued rainbows of peaceful promise, as it were, whilst a-floating back behind him on the breeze, like I mentioned it had floated on ahead of him, come once more the exulting strain:

"'With my hippy, hippy, hippy,
And my hippy, hippy, hi;
With my hippy, hippy, hippy,
Ya-hoo-oo ee-ee — ha-ay ——'"

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VIII

ROSY-LIGHT-OF-DAWN

THE stock tender at the Box Elder stage station, having halfway washed the few dishes that the simplicity of the noonday meal had required, hung up his pan, threw the imperfectly wrung-out rag at a nail in the wall and made haste to rejoin his guests. It was his proud boast that he never let his dishes go and, news hungry as he was in his sagebrush solitude, he stuck to his principle, although the old bullwhacker and the Bar T boy had been smoking in the shade of the barn for a good five minutes and had doubtless talked of many interesting things during that time. The Bar T boy was still talking when the stock tender came up.

"Here, let me in on this, Bud," the stock tender requested earnestly. "Who was it? What had she done?"

It was a moving story of man's inhumanity to woman. The Bar T boy's chivalrous nature was shocked by the circumstances, which he related with a smolder of indignation in his eyes. It seemed that a low-flung granger by the name of Smithers had so far forgotten all decency as to pinion his poor wife's wrists in his own viselike grip, thrust her into a chicken house and padlock the door on her.

"And all she'd done was take after him with a butcher knife, the small-souled son of a gun," the Bar T boy ex-

plained wrathfully. "He could have outrun her like a mice, with them long legs of his, or he could have clum one of them cottonwoods and stayed there till she got over her mad. But, no! Nothing would do him but wrastle her as if she'd been a man. Say, Reddy, you tell me what show a woman has got with a coyote like that. I've a notion to ride over and beat him up a mess, just to learn him."

"You keep out of it, Bud," the stock tender advised. "She'll learn him!"

The old bullwhacker took his pipe from his mouth and nodded assent. "I ain't defending this Smithers party," said he with twinkling eyes. "But all the same it looks like this lady of his is too brash and enthusiastic. She hadn't ought to have tipped her hand. Her play was to sort of gentle him like Charlie Planché's squaw done Charlie. Ever hear about that?"

The old bullwhacker chuckled with due modesty when he was encouraged to proceed, and forthwith told the story of Planché's gentling.

She wasn't no blanket squaw, Charlie's wife, you understand. She was one of old Fortune Galmiche's girls — Galmiche at the Reservation — and she'd had her education at St. Mary's; spoke English as correct as you and me. Pretty as a picture too. Her Injun name was Iyoahinapewin, which means the rosy-light-of-dawn, so you can figure she wasn't so homely. Another thing, old Fortune Galmiche gave out that fifty head of ponies went with every girl of his who married a white man. Right here I want you to understand that I wasn't no disappointed rival. I've et my share of dog and buffalo berry and I've

got good friends in the Sioux Nation, but as pretty as Iysoah was, and for all the ponies and the Government allotment of land and the rations that went with it, I had my opinion of squaw men. When Charlie told me that he was a-going *wickiya* I told him what my views was. But he only laughed.

"It's a matter of taste," says he. "I've seen white girls that wasn't much lighter than what Iysoah is, and, what's more, I'm sick of punching cows all summer for one fine large Ogalalla headache in the fall and a slim chance to feed stock for my board in the winter. I'm going to settle down with my Injun princess. She's good enough for me."

"A heap plenty," says I. "If you look at it that way I'm bound to agree with you," I says.

"Another thing," says Charlie. "You take an Injun woman and she ain't got no fool notions about being too good to work."

"That's right," I told him. "All you've got to do is rustle the meat. She'll scrape the hides and tan 'em, and sew your scalps on your shirt, and bead your moccasins, and set up the tepee. You've sure got a snap."

He looked at me kind of ugly; but I got a bid to the wedding and I went. I want to tell you that Fortune Galmiche did that wedding up brown, and when I seen Iysoah, the little brown runt that I remembered running round Fortune's doorway with no more on than a liberal-minded man would call decent, I didn't blame Charlie a little bit. All fixed up in white she was, with a wreath of waxy star-of-Bethlehem that the Sisters had made for her in her hair, veil and little white-kid, high-heeled shoes, and all the trimmings. I tell you, sir, gentlemen, she was a princess, sure

enough. Charlie didn't have a bad appearance himself, and the way she looked at him, thinks I, "That's the way I want my woman to look at me, if I ever get one."

Well, they went over on Ash Creek, where there was good range for the ponies, and old Fortune had built them an elegant little frame house. I happened along by about two or three months after the wedding and everything seemed to be running slick as grease. I'd had my doubts, because I'd seen young squaws from Agency schools start out in corsets and white muslin and, before a year was out, be padding round in moccasins and wearing their hair with a streak of red paint down the part. I didn't know but what I'd find a tepee or two set up in the yard and a tribe of Iysoah's relations on her mother's side squatting round, pegging out hides and jerking deer meat; but the first thing that I noticed was a picket fence round the house and behind it a row of Russian sunflowers and a mess of other posies. Charlie had got the house painted and there was white curtains in the windows. The flossiest kind of a layout; and, as I tied my horse to the corner post, I heard Iysoah singing Jerusalem the Golden as happy as you please in the kitchen. I stood right there in my tracks and listened. No *waukapomini* about that. Prettiest voice you ever heard too—smooth as velvet and as clear as a meadow lark's whistle. I'd always like to hear Iysoah talk, but I'd never heard her sing.

"Jerusalem crickets!" says I to myself. "That ain't no squaw."

Why, it might have been back in Ohio, where I come from. But just as I was thinking them thoughts, she struck up:

"Mita, Wakantanka,
Nikiyedan ——"

"I take it all back," says I to myself. "You can't get the Injun out of 'em."

It was Nearer, My God; but it was Injun. So I hollered and opened the gate — and then, blamed if I didn't have to change my idees again. She come out, and — well, I pulled my hat off as if it had been Mrs. Doc Stewart or any other lady. Nothing fine about her — just a blue-calico wrapper and her hair in a plait down her back, but the wrapper was tied in at the waist with a red ribbon and it suited her right down to her trim little ankles. Altogether, what with the way she smiled and stuck out her small brown paw at me, I was sure took aback.

"Come right in, Mr. Stegg," says she. "Very glad to see you. Charlie went over to the Rosebud this morning to look at some cows he's thinking of buying, but I expect him any minute now."

She takes me into a little setting room with Brussels carpet on the floor, and a drop lamp with glass jiggers onto it, and a bookcase plumb full of books, and a parlor organ in one corner; and she sets me down in a plush-arm rocker. I'm a liar if I didn't begin to sweat and wonder what would I do with my hands. But that wore off, and inside of ten minutes we was gassing away and laughing like old friends. After a while I got up and took a squint at the bookcase.

"Charlie's getting to be sort of choice in his reading," I says, picking up one of the books. It was in some foreign language.

"Oh, them's my books," she says, "Charlie ain't much

on reading. That's Molyare. I'm French, you know, on my father's side."

Just then there was a racket outside amongst the chickens, and she jumped up.

"There's that miserable hawk again," she says. "I'll fix him."

She opened a drawer and took out a thirty-eight and ran out with it. I followed her and, sure enough, there was a chicken hawk circling over the yard.

"Watch," says she, and "crack" went the gun and down tumbled Mister Hawk without any head on him. Just off-hand shooting. Didn't take no aim or nothing.

"H-m!" thinks I. "Part French, are you? I'd be right sorry for anyone that comes along here that was part hawk."

Hows'ever, we went back to the setting room and, after a while, Charlie came in, and it was pretty to see her run to him. Charlie took it tolerable good-natured too. Looking well, Charlie was, and if it hadn't been for that wicked eye of his and one or two things I knew about him, I'd have said they was well matched. He would have Iysoah set down and play me a piece on the organ, and while she was doing it I could see him watching her with a grin on his face. I liked that in him, too, although I can't say Iysoah was much on that there instrument. Kind of stuttered on it. Still, counting out the times she slipped up, you could make out a tune.

After that, Iysoah went into the kitchen and fixed us up a meal. I won't say I never et better cooking, because that would be a lie; but it wasn't so a hungry man couldn't get away with it, and it was clean. And I took notice that

Charlie never made no kick. Another thing I noticed was the soft, cooing voice that woman had when she spoke to him, and she couldn't go nowheres near him without touching him — a little stroke on his shirt sleeve, or a pat on his shoulder or his hand. It certainly was pretty.

I had to pull my freight after dinner and Charlie came down to the trail with me.

"Well, how does my white brother like my wigwam?" says he as I swang up onto my horse. "I ain't took to the breechclout yet, do you reckon?"

"Heap good," says I. "You're sure lucky, if you don't get the idee that you deserve it. If you treat Mrs. Planché right, I wouldn't wonder if you didn't amount to something in course of time."

I wasn't trying to give him guff either. I honestly thought that the boy might amount to something. I'd always kind of liked him, mean as he was. Ever know a mean man you kind of liked? He was a good cowhand, although he had never held down a job for any length of time, and he was smart enough, when he wasn't too smart for his own good. There couldn't be no doubt but what he thought a heap of that little wife of his, and I figured that one thing might straighten him up. On the other hand, it was early in the game yet, and, after all, Iysoah was an Injun. One time I'd think of her in her setting room, pretty and high-toned and refined as anybody, and then I'd think of that hawk flopping down out of the blue sky, and remember the cur'ous sort of smile that she gave when it hit the ground. I'd think of her father, the little old Frenchman, Fortune Galmiche, polite as a basket of chips, and all the time chattering and laughing and waving his

hands, as free-handed as he was light-hearted, as gritty as God ever makes a man and as straight as a string.

And then I'd think of Mrs. Galmiche — full-blood Teton squaw, with a face that looked as if it had been chipped out of red porphyry, high cheek bones and hook nose; never talking; sitting by the fireplace in Fortune's house; smoking her killikinick in her long Injun pipe, or else astraddle of her pony riding to the Agency store. I'd seen her once at a beef issue — when they turned the critters loose for the bucks to shoot down — sometimes with arrows — and the squaws cut 'em up.

Then I'd think of Charlie again, clean and clear eyed, grinning at me while Iysoah played the organ — and I'd think of him kicking his horse in the belly and jerking its bit till the blood run because it didn't stand round to suit him, and I'd think of some other things that I knew and had heard about him.

Finally I quit thinking about them. That winter I didn't have time, being too busy helping to keep a couple of thousand head of cattle from drifting down into the Panhandle, but at the calf round-up on Hat Creek I run across Petie Jones from White River, and I asked him pointedly about Charlie and Mrs. Charlie.

"He's one son of a gun, that Charlie Planché," says Petie.

"In a general way, most of us are," says I. "What seems to be the particular trouble with him?"

"Oh, there's talk," says he.

"Once more, for the cigars," says I.

"Well," says Petie, "I don't know as there's anything for the grand jury — as yet; but his little bunch of cows has

sure made a record increase this spring. One or two of 'em dropped yearlings, seems like, and there's a big percentage of twins and triplets. There's talk to that effect."

"There always is," I says, which was true.

Anybody who starts a little bunch alongside of the big herd is liable to be unjustly suspicioned. There's even been talk about me. Hows'ever, I dropped that and asked if there was anything else.

"Well," says Petie, "you was asking about his woman. I stopped overnight at his place a couple of weeks ago and I wasn't stuck on the way he talked to her. Of course she's got Injun blood in her, but that ain't no excuse. I don't go round to a man's house and eat his grub and then come away and back-cap him, but you asked me and, besides, everybody knows that Charlie Planché is one son of a gun. Well, there wasn't nothing, only Charlie had his ears back and his eyes rolling and she was a-walking wide of him. That's the way I figured it. If she'd give him any reason it might be different, but I never see a gentler-spoken woman or one that tried harder to please a man. Never an ugly word out of her. 'Yes, Charlie dear,' and 'No, Charlie dear,' and 'I'm very sorry, Charlie dear.' That was the way of it — and him making his cracks about squaws, right afore her and me! What was you saying about that Box E cow?"

That was all I could get out of him; but it was enough. I could put two and two together and make a big black four out of it easy enough. Inside of another year Charlie would sell out and hit the breeze for parts as unknown as possible, providing old Fortune didn't get a line on him with his buffalo gun; and poor little Iysoah — she'd take it

hard. I didn't have no idee that she'd make a holler. She wasn't that kind; but it was a cinch that there would be something to holler about. A mean man don't improve with time much oftener than a rotten egg, and if he abuses his wife before strangers it ain't likely he'll be a considerate and loving husband when there's thirty-odd miles between them and any third person whatsoever. It didn't take much knowledge of human nature to figure that out. Love's young dream was sure over for little Rosy-Light-of-Dawn.

I got some more supplementary evidence, as Judge Benedict calls it, along in the fall. I'd drifted down south myself and it was in Abilene that I met up with Lute Boggs. Lute worked for the Bar T one time, Bud. Maybe you've heard of him. Well, Lute had been up in the White River country, and he'd stopped off at Charlie's place and found Charlie had been throwed by his horse and was in bed with a broken arm and collar bone.

"Pity it wasn't his blamed neck," says Boggs. "Still, he was busted up a considerable and that little woman was nursing him like a mother. I'd have been willing to have gone him a bust better to have had the nursing she gave him. She couldn't do enough for him, and, say, when she talked to him it sounded like one of them mourning doves back in the woods, and when he talked to her — well, I put in. I couldn't help it. Making allowances for his bones bothering him, it wasn't no way to speak to no woman, squaw or no squaw. And what do you reckon she said? 'I think it will be better for you not to interfere, Mr. Boggs,' says she, looking at me calm and steady. 'Mr. Planché and I understand each other and he didn't mean that.'

"'Didn't I?' says Charlie, sneering. He was going to say some more, but I judged it wasn't none of my business, so I lit out. But he's a daisy, Charlie is! Lucky for him she is a squaw; a white woman would get right up on her ear and make trouble."

I allowed he was right, but it did seem a shame. I was young enough then so's I worried a heap more over other people's troubles than what I do now, and I reckon if I had been within a day's ride of friend Charlie, I'd have prodded in and shattered his anatomy some more. Hows'ever, I was in Texas and in Texas I stayed for close on two years, working for Jim Hammersley and saving my money. Then I got kind of homesick for the old ranges and I bought me a bunch of horses and drove them up north. Along in July I'd sold the last ten head to the Anglo-American, and there at the T A N ranch I met up with a nice old geezer from Boston who was staying with Harry Oelrichs, and he wanted a number-one foreman for an outfit his company had bought out south of the Rosebud. That was how it come that one morning, about three weeks later, I was riding along Ash Creek within six miles of Planché's place. I'm a man that don't like to have my feelings harrowed unnecessary as a general thing, and I hadn't even made inquiry after Charlie and Iysoah, but right there I took the notion strong that I'd ride that six mile.

I wasn't none too hopeful that I'd find so much as the house. A lone chimney maybe, left standing on the little flat, and jack rabbits and rattlesnakes sporting about in the weeds and trash where there was once a happy home. I'd look on the scene of desolation a spell, heave a few pensive sighs and mosey along. Or maybe I'd find another family

there, no telling. There was a chance of Charlie being there yet, and I could just see him, growed fat and flabby, with bloodshot eyes and a two weeks' crop of whiskers on his dirty face, and tobacco and grease down the front of his shirt, like any other squaw man. One or two of the windows in the house would be broke and rags stuffed in from last winter; there would be a slop of dishwater in the dooryard, and bones that the chickens had picked, and flies in swarms. Somehow I couldn't settle in my mind what Iysoah would look like, but in a general way she'd fit in.

I struck the trail that led to the ford, and there my first theory was knocked endways. It was a well-traveled trail and there was fresh wagon tracks all along it. I splashed through the ford, loped along through the cottonwood bottom and up the rise, and it didn't take more than one look to tell me that I'd hit it the second guess. The house was there, but strangers was living in it — strangers who had plowed and fenced in as much as thirty acres, strangers who had in a fine ripening stand of wheat and a likely patch of sod corn, to say nothing of the beginnings of an apple orchard and a green garden. There was a corral, too, and three good-sized stacks of hay; there was a barn, and a little windmill was spinning away with a chug-chug of pumping water. I couldn't begin to tell you all there was, but what there wasn't was signs or tokens of Charlie Planché being anywhere round. The only exception was Charlie himself, and I didn't believe in him.

Him and a tow-headed man who looked like a Swede was tinkering with a mower, and as I rode up Charlie dropped his monkey wrench and came up to help me open the gate. He moved lively. He wasn't fat and he wasn't flabby,

and the only dirt on him was a smear of machine grease across his forehead, where he'd wiped the sweat away with his bare arm. He'd shaved that morning; there was a little cut on his chin where the razor had slipped. He was as brown as a late July Dakota sun could burn him — face, neck and bare arms. He had on a clean blue shirt and clean overalls stuck into these lace-up-the-front boots. He was as decent looking a man as you'd want to look at — man, you understand.

"Dog my cats, if it ain't old Sam Stegg," says he, and you'd have thought he was glad to see me by the way he acted. He grabbed old Baldy's bridle away from me and called to the Swede to take him and give him a feed of grain. "Come on up to the house," says he. "Iysoah will be tickled to death."

As we came to the yard gate there's a yell and something about two foot high jumps out and fastens onto Charlie's leg. Charlie picks him up and tucks him under his arm like he was fifty cents' worth of sugar in a sack, instead of twenty pounds of squealing, squirming male papoose.

"Ambushed me, did you, you skeezicks?" says Charlie. Then he hollers, "Iysoah!" and Iysoah come out.

I'd pinched myself twice on the way from the barn to the house. I pinched myself again before I shook hands with her. She looked real and she felt real though. Too solid for a dream. Not fat, but what you'd call nicely filled out. A woman, and a happy woman. Oh, you can tell 'em when you see the genuine article, every time, but they're so scarce you get fooled by fair imitations once in a while. It wasn't no "Hurrah, girls!" with her; it was something quiet and peaceful, but it was there, right in her eyes, even

when she wasn't smiling. You could sort of sense it.

But, at that, I missed something. I wouldn't ask for a kinder welcome than she gave me, but there was something missing. The next minute she spoke to Charlie, and right away it come to me what it was — the coo had gone out of her voice. Soft and pleasant enough it was, although she was scolding him for carrying the young one head downward, but it wasn't exactly the velvet that Charlie used to get — and I noticed Charlie up-ended the little rooster *pronto*. Then she scolded her papoose and — it was the old dove note again, and then some.

She carried him out and was back again, smiling and bright, with a pitcher of lemonade with ice in it. Ice on Ash Creek!

"Sure enough," says Charlie. "But why not? Forty-five below is cold enough to freeze ice, ain't it? That's what we had last winter. I dammed up the creek, and I could have filled the ice house twice over."

He rattled on, bragging about his ice house, his garden, his crops, his stock and his kid, what him and Ole had done last year and what they intended to do; and whenever he stopped for breath Iysoah put in. Ole was married, and his wife helped with the housework and the kid, and they paid 'em forty a month and they was worth twice that — and questions about Texas and news of the reservation; and I sat there, pinching myself once in a while and all the while taking her in. Fresh-laundered, flowered-calico dress, starchy skirts, and shoes as neat as ever; hair done up — not like the braids tied with red-ribbon bows that I remembered, but more stylish, and mighty becoming to her. And happy!

By and by we had dinner, and they was both set I should stay overnight. I stayed. I wanted to find out something that I knew Iysoah wouldn't tell me, not if I stayed a hundred years and could have asked her; but with gabby Charlie it was different. He was one of those boys that are mighty interested in themselves and like to talk about what interests 'em.

After supper, when the chores was done, I got my chance. Iysoah is putting little Charles Fortune Planché to sleep in the next room and Charlie and me is sitting smoking. Charlie winks one of his wicked eyes at me and allows it isn't often he gets the chance.

"She doesn't like it," he says, "on account of it not being good for me. You wouldn't think that, her being ——"

"Injun?" says I.

He frowns and shakes his head at me, jerking his thumb at the bedroom.

"Not but what she's proud of her Injun blood," he says, a little above a whisper; "but you know how it is. An Irishman don't like you to call him Irish, and Ole came near fighting one day when I called him a damn Swede. I had to apologize."

"I'd have s'posed you'd smoke anyway," says I. "What would happen if you did?"

He looked round at the door again.

"I don't know," he says, "but I've got a hunch that something would happen. Oh, I'd smoke if I wanted to, but I tell you, Sam, Iysoah is a mighty smart little woman. I've took her advice more'n once and done well by it, and she thinks the sun rises and sets in me. What I say is,

when you get a woman like that, treat her well. Humor her."

"That's a pious idee," says I. "Still," I says, "you didn't talk that way afore you married her. You was a-going to make her stand round while you just lay round. When I come up this morning I expected to see her splitting wood for dinner."

Charlie grins sort of foolish. "She'd split it, if I told her to," says he, "but she just naturally can't handle an ax. One time she tried it and it flew out of her hand, and, if I hadn't dodged, it would have brained me. She was all broke up about it, to think what a narrow escape I had. Felt awful bad."

"H-m," says I. "I wonder if she didn't. When was that?"

"Along when we was first married," says he. "I chopped the wood myself after that."

"Well, you're husky enough to do it," says I. "You look like a man that's well fed. Iysoah has got to be a tolerable good cook."

"She's learned," says he. "I used to make a roar when she didn't cook to please me, and she soon learned. But at first — one time she fixed up a stew that blamed near poisoned me. Colic! Say, I like to died. She was mighty nigh crazy about it, scared plumb out of her senses. She rustled a flat rock and het it up to put on my belly and in her fluster she got it about red hot, and — mamma! It was a couple of weeks afore I could move. I sure suffered. Iysoah said it hurt her more'n it did me, and she certainly took on like it did."

"I bet she's a good nurse," says I, "but anybody's liable to get flustered and lose their head."

"She don't lose hers, as a general thing," says Charlie. "One time I got bit by a rattlesnake right in this house. It beats the Dutch how it got in, and it sure bit me. If it hadn't been for Iysoah I'd have been a goner because I was plumb out of whisky — drunk the last drop the night before. See that little cubby-hole under the shelves? I reached in for my hat that Iysoah had stuck in there and the son of a gun got me — on the arm. I'd skassly let out a holler afore Iysoah had that snake's head mashed; then, in less time than it takes to tell it, she'd got my arm tied and was cutting into the bite with my razor to let the blood out, after which she poured ammonia on it. I didn't have to tell her what to do. She knew; made every move count. Some women would have taken half a day to find the latigo string and the razor and the ammonia, but not Iysoah. Kept her head that time, all right. Well, sir, if you never had ammonia poured into an open wound, you ain't got no idee what it's like. And she sure bled me good and plenty. But it done the work."

"H-m," says I. "You sure had a streak of bad luck. I seen Boggs down in Texas and he was telling me about you getting throwed and all stove up. Must have been a good horse, Charlie."

"Well, sir," says Charlie, "that was a mighty funny thing. It wasn't no good horse; it was an old plug that I most generally couldn't rowel out of a walk, but I'd no sooner got on him than he let into bucking like a crazy outlaw. Even so, I'd have stayed with him, but both cinches

busted, and saddle and me went a-kiting. I thought I wan't never going to light. They was new hair cinches, too, so you can figure it was some bucking."

"H-m-m," I says again.

And I studied on them happenings a spell and it come to me that there was a weed the Injuns call *sica* that if you take the pith and boil it — or stew it in a stew — and swallow it, you get an elegant case of fence-rail colic. It come to me that I'd seen Injuns take and cut the poison sacs out of rattlers just for deviltry. They say they fix 'em all that way for the snake dances, but some says not. Hows'ever, I knew myself that the button of a prickly pear under a saddle blanket will make anything buck, and that even new hair cinches could be wore through by rubbing them against a rock or taking a blacksmith's rasp to 'em.

"I know what you're a-thinking of," says Charlie. "I had my suspicions myself, and I told her so one time. We'd had a few words — like all married folks will — and soon after that, while she was cleaning my gun it went off and took the tip of my ear. Right here, see?"

He showed me his left ear and, sure enough, the tip was sort of jagged.

"I told her what I suspicioned and told her that I'd like for her to let up on me, but I felt ashamed of myself when I seen how it hurt her. Shucks! she didn't know nothing about guns; couldn't tell the stock from the barr'l. 'How could you think such a thing of your poor little Injun wife that loves you so?' she says. And there ain't no doubt but she thinks the world of me, Sam. Never gave me a cross word yet, and I'll own up that at first I was kind of short

with her, although I never licked her but that once — except — and that was just love taps — and I'd been drinking.

"'But,' she says, 'being Injun, I can't help believing in medicine, Charlie dear, and I think you make bad medicine for yourself every time you raise hell with your poor little wife. It certainly has always looked that way. It skeers me,' she says, 'and I'm afraid that sometime, when you say ugly things or do ugly things, that medicine will get to working and make something awful happen to you. The house might burn down and you in it. You try to act better, Charlie dear.'

"No, Sam," says Charlie, "I don't believe she ever played it on me. She thinks too much of me. And I treat her well, too, and, as I say, she's smart, and I'm willing to take her advice now and then. Listen!"

I listened. Iysoah was singing to the kid in that dove voice:

"Dehan iyoyanpa,
Qa ciyatan ——"

"Injun," thinks I. But Charlie was looking tickled to death.

Pretty soon she stopped and Charlie pinched his cigarette out and sneaked the stub into his boot leg. The bedroom door opened softly and she stood for a moment in the opening, smiling at us — the way a mother smiles when she has just seen her baby's eyes close in sleep and has laid him down on his little pillow.

Iysoahinapewin, sure enough, she looked — the rosy-light-of-dawn!

"That's all right," commented the bar T boy, "but this here Smithers lady, she hasn't got no Injun in her."

"Don't you let that worry you, son," said the old bull-whacker. "They all have."

THE END

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